

Fair Play: Play and Community in Inclusive Settings, Considered Through the  
Philosophies of John Dewey and Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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**Abstract**

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An inclusive education setting is one in which students with and without disabilities are able to learn and play in the same educational setting. Inclusion does not happen simply by placing students of varying ability levels in the same classroom; the community must be sculpted by the educators. Rousseau and Dewey lend us valuable perspective as well as pedagogical recommendations regarding the role play can take in an inclusive setting. I explore this complex issue through two texts, *Democracy and Education* and *Emile*. Both texts emphasize the importance of a student's development of self, as well as argue that play is an important part of children's educational experience. Rousseau and Dewey differ, however, in the extent social interaction should impact the education and development of children. As I explore these works and consider specific examples from my own experience at the Experimental Education Unit, I hope to discover how these philosophers' arguments concerning pedagogical strategies for play can illuminate the importance of play in quality inclusive education.

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## Chapter 1: Questions Regarding Play within Inclusive Education Settings – Introducing Rousseau and Dewey

During “free choice” time in Kindergarten at the Experimental Education Unit at the University of Washington, I place a ball at the top of a spiral ramp and say, “my turn”. The ball spins to the bottom. I pick it up, and hand it to the 5-year-old laying on the ground next to me.

“Your turn”, I say, placing the ball in the child’s hand, and tapping the top of the ramp. He puts the ball in without looking, then runs his fingers over the carpet. We repeat this process several times, until he abruptly stands up and runs out the open door. When he is outside, he is laughing, smiling, running with his face upturned to the rain. He spins in circles and is clearly lost in his own, joy-filled world. After a few minutes of outside time, I know it’s my job to stop him from running and to bring him inside to practice the more traditional aspects of play again. Placing a ball on a ramp, stacking plastic ice cream to offer it to a friend, kicking a ball, building with Legos; we have three-step play plans for all of these.

These three-step plans are intended to teach this 5-year-old boy with autism “functional” play. The importance of play for social development was established by Vygotsky, who believed that play was the primary social activity through which children develop social or interpersonal knowledge; he emphasized that play is mediated through social experience with others (1966). This foundational psychological theory underlies the emphasis on teaching children on the autism spectrum functional play. Through functional play, ideally, children (both typically developing and those with a developmental disability) acquire many interrelated skills that are necessary for attaining social competence, such as the ability to resolve conflicts or to learn to compromise.

Children on the autism spectrum traditionally face challenges when learning how to play and (how to) socialize with their peers. Problems with verbal and nonverbal communication (such as eye contact, facial expression, or pointing) combine with difficulties sustaining attention or thinking flexibly. This can lead children on the spectrum to appear uninterested in joining their peers in play, or they join peers in ways that are one-sided or rigid. These behaviors can reinforce a cycle of exclusion, in which a child with autism who interacts with peers is met with bullying or indifference. If exclusion makes the autistic child anxious, typically-developing peers could further avoid the child, leading to a vicious cycle of avoidance-anxiety-avoidance.

In order to prevent this negative cycle, teachers in Special Education classrooms work to normalize autism for typically developing children, as well as to foster the development of typical play skills for children on the spectrum. Simply placing a child with a disability in a classroom with a child who is typically developing does not construct an inclusive classroom, nor does it make the two children friends. Generally, one or both students need the guidance of an adult to learn how to play with each other, how to interact in a way that both find engaging. In an inclusive special education setting, such as the Experimental Education Unit (EEU), most parts of the day are modified in order to be able to include children with developmental disabilities in the general education setting. The “free choice” part of the day is a time for all kids to go from one kindergarten classroom to the other, to play (and learn) through building with blocks, going camping or to the doctor’s office in the dramatic play area, or completing art projects they have designed themselves.

“Free choice isn’t free” is a phrase I have heard repeatedly in my classes at the University of Washington and in working at the EEU. The phrase is supposed to indicate that free choice is an opportunity for embedded learning, for students to learn something at each place they stop to play. Running back and forth from activity to activity isn’t an option – students must choose an activity and spend time playing at it. In so doing, they hypothetically, catch on not only to math and literacy concepts, but also to social concepts – just as Vygotsky would want. Of course, this is because typically developing children often are drawn to play with one another rather than on their own; this is not always the case, but they often seek out others to play with and thus they slowly learn how to generate their own play ideas and follow the ideas of others. Where typically developing children may be learning literacy concepts through writing a story co-operatively in the art area, children on the autism spectrum are often going through a “play plan” with an instructional assistant, learning skills such as imitation through repetition while playing with toys in a socially typical manner.

Within the differing experiences of play for typically developing and developmentally delayed children, a multitude of important philosophical questions arise. Most scholars agree that play is important for early childhood education; however, play is implemented to varying degrees, and it looks entirely different for a child with developmental disabilities, especially for one on the autism spectrum.

In the following chapters, I will examine the works of two philosophers: Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* and John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. These works, published in 1762 and 1916, respectively, are considered to be seminal works in western philosophy of education. Both philosophers engage the idea of play; however, they do so from different places, at

different times, and to different extents. As previously mentioned, I am particularly interested in education for students with disabilities both developmental and behavioral – although, for this thesis I will be focusing on students with developmental disabilities who are being taught in an inclusive setting. An inclusive setting is one in which children with different backgrounds, cultures, and ability levels are taught altogether in a classroom, rather than segregating based off of ability. Combining all levels of ability into one classroom highlights the differences and similarities in how children with and without special needs experience play. This combination also gives rise to a number of important philosophical questions, through which Dewey and Rousseau will help to guide my thinking.

Focusing on disability and inclusion is challenging when examining the thoughts of philosophers who were writing and thinking before the education of students with these disabilities was common. I will closely examine how each philosopher views the role of the teacher, the individual student, and the social group. Additionally, I will analyze why Dewey and Rousseau believe that play is crucial to achieving educational goals, and the extent to which students should be able to choose their play in a school setting. I will not specifically consider the implications of my findings for a Special Education context until I first explain their thoughts concerning play and social interactions in the in the context of their respective arguments.

When thinking about the importance of play in a child's developmental and educational experience, it is not only children with developmental delays who come to mind. Before working at the Experimental Education Unit, I was employed at Ryther, a residential treatment facility for children with behavioral disorders. Due to extreme abuse and neglect, which often indicated isolation from others, it was not uncommon for children to enter the facility with

nearly no knowledge of how to play with others or how to entertain themselves when alone. For the purposes of my discussion, I am considering play to be both light-hearted social interactions and individual exploration that follows an internal curiosity or instinct. At Ryther, playing generally required nearly constant scaffolding (providing each individual step to the child in order to prevent fights from breaking out) – this anxiety from the children around play extended to the classroom. Without basic play skills, it was difficult to resolve minor disagreements or engage children in a group project. I distinctly remember having to remove a child from a room when a group discussion about the life cycle of salmon grew contentious; having learned only to respond with anger, this contentiousness was generally the first place where class discussions would go, which made group learning an adventurous undertaking. The fact that play often led to feelings of anger meant that play was often viewed (by both adults and children) through a negative lens at Ryther, and it was thus a challenge to build a community that fostered curiosity or compromise.

The importance of play for children, therefore, did not strike me as worth consideration until I moved from Ryther to the inclusive community at the EEU. Play is built into the school-day, and the inclusive setting highlighted the different ways in which children of varied ability levels play. It was there that I observed how play can influence the development of a child's skills, natural curiosity, and identity. While my initial observations surrounding the importance of play comes from my work at Ryther in behavioral health, it was my move to the Experimental Education Unit and work with children with developmental delays in an inclusive school setting that brought to light my questions, specifically relating to the role of play in education. These observations and developing questions surrounding play led me to the decision to read both

*Democracy and Education* and *Emile* – works I had read before, but without the on-going real-life context I was now experiencing.

In order to determine **why** Rousseau and Dewey believe play is necessary to a child's education, one must think about the extent to which social groups, pressures, and perceptions influence the individual. Both philosophers believe it is important for individuals to interact with society, however, they approach this interaction from different stances. Rousseau's *Emile* centers around a student who has been removed from society completely during his childhood and who works independently to build self-reliance and self-love in order to later contribute to a democratic society without constantly comparing himself to others. By contrast, Dewey's *Democracy and Education* argues that social groups and social interactions are essential for learning and growing; Dewey believes that in order to develop the self-reliance that Rousseau thinks leads to happiness, individuals must engage in social relationships, because it is only through social relationships that individuals can develop meaning.

Additionally, considering what the role of the teacher should be in guiding and teaching play can be taken up in an examination of both Rousseau and Dewey. In inclusive education, it is the job of the instructors to take active roles in promoting an understanding of difference and building a diverse community of learners. However, it is important to think about what the boundaries of this role should be. When I move a child at the Experimental Education Unit away from their preferred activity in order to do something that is more "typical" developmentally, I am exercising the inherent power in my role to direct that child. The teacher, obviously, is intertwined with the student – in the case of a child with autism, the child sometimes does not have the ability to say 'no'. They can express their displeasure, certainly, but there is a certain

level of personal freedom that is removed from the child when the child does not have the capability to verbally communicate this feeling to their teacher.

There are a variety of questions that arise when considering the possible differences concerning the educational benefits of play for typically-developing children and special needs children.

In this thesis, I will explore the following questions:

- 1** a.) Both Rousseau and Dewey argue that play is essential for the education of typically developing children, although their reasons for this claim differ. Why does each philosopher believe that play is essential for children's education?
  - b.) According to each philosopher, how should teachers help typically-developing children learn to play?
  - c.) Do the arguments about play that Rousseau and Dewey put forward for typically-developing children pertain to special needs children? Why or why not?
  - d.) Assuming that their arguments do apply for special needs children, what role should teachers play in helping special needs children learn to play? For example, should teachers modify the play of a child with autism so that they become more socially typical? Why or why not?
- 2a.)** Both Rousseau and Dewey argue that typically developing children should be self-confident active participants in their own learning, although their reasons for this claim differ. Why do Rousseau and Dewey argue that typically developing children should be self-confident active participants in their own learning?

- b.) According to each philosopher, how should teachers help typically developing students achieve this goal?
- c.) Would Rousseau and Dewey argue that special needs children should become self-confident active participants in their own learning? Why or why not?
- d.) If yes, how should teachers help special needs children achieve this goal? For example, should teachers help typically developing children in inclusive classrooms support their peers with disabilities learn to play? How?

3a.) A sign hanging in the EEU reads, “Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.” According to this sign, the goal of inclusive education is to develop relationships that encourage all students to love and feel loved. Would Rousseau and Dewey agree with the EEU’s goal? Why or why not?

b.) If Rousseau and/or Dewey agree with the EEU’s goal, what would they say about how teachers should help both typically developing students and special needs students develop loving relationships in inclusive classrooms?

As we will see, both Rousseau and Dewey argue that play is an important part of children’s educational experience, leading students to independent discoveries and new skills. Through independent play or play in social groups, students can learn how to create social structures that are by nature inclusive, thus improving educational outcomes for all. Both *Democracy and Education* and *Emile* emphasize the importance of a student’s development of self. While Rousseau prioritizes internal, individualized development as a precursor for social

development, and Dewey believes that development at all stages requires social interaction, both philosophers take clear stances against educational models that lead to feelings of exclusion for children. As I explore these works and consider specific examples from my own experience at the Experimental Education Unit, I hope to discover how these philosophers' arguments concerning pedagogical strategies for play can illuminate the importance of play in quality inclusive education.

## **Chapter 2: Rousseau, Play, and Self-Confidence - Philosophical and Pedagogical Strategies**

Children in kindergarten demonstrate on a daily basis the values and opinions they have learned from their parents, peers, or general society. Recently, two kindergarteners began arguing about what color baby doll was the best, with one remarking that the dark-skinned dolls are “always on sale”, continuing on to call them “bad” and “ugly”. When one child refused to play with the doll, the rest of the children immediately followed suit, and within a 30 second time-span the dolls went from a popular play choice to forgotten on the floor. It’s unlikely, though not impossible, that one of the children’s parents stated that dark-skinned baby dolls are bad; what is more likely is that they have seen nearly ceaseless implicit and explicit messaging advertising the white baby dolls as bright, new and fun – the children can then sense what is “popular” and “good”, and therefore can take their cues from this. The rest of the children, still attempting to learn how to develop friendships, are likely to follow along with a close-minded opinion such as the one this child had, and the tide of play in the classroom was thus turned.

Rousseau believes that the best way to educate children is to remove them from this messaging, from the signals that tell children nearly from birth what is socially acceptable and “right”. The idea of play, for Rousseau, is key for helping students learn to meet their genuine needs. Time to play outside, to explore, to question and fall, helps children become self-confident and self-sufficient while also avoiding insecurity and self-doubt. The role of adults is to help children learn to develop self-reliance through play.

Rousseau thinks that individuals who develop self-confidence during childhood will be able to successfully re-enter society and connect with others when they reach adolescence.

Having developed self-confidence during childhood, adolescents will not be dependent on their peers or prejudiced against them. Thus, they can view their peers as equals. This, of course, is getting at the same goal as inclusive classrooms, in which children can exist together in a place of secure equality rather than attempting to shame or exclude one another.

While not explicitly stated, Rousseau's definition of the term, individual, is deeply tied to his explanation of *amour-propre*. Being influenced by *amour-propre* turns a man or woman into an amalgam of society's traits, a composite of other people's opinions. By contrast, an individual is someone who does not depend on others for self-definition and is not susceptible to believing what other people say she should need or value. Being an individual, therefore, means not having to prove to yourself that you have value; you do not feel any need to change yourself based on what you see in others or on what others see in you. Rousseau writes, "Remember that as soon as *amour-propre* has developed, the relative *I* is constantly in play, and the young man never observes others without returning to himself and comparing himself with them" (*Emile*, 243)<sup>1</sup>.

We see the tendency to compare oneself to others consistently in the modern era, with social media as an easy and ever-present example – people on social media can share their location, where they buy their clothes or their food, who they are with, in a way that presents their version of an ideal reality. This then influences others, who feel less and less content with their own reality when presented with someone else's ideal, especially when they have not yet

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations in this chapter are taken from *Emile*, cited below. Jean Jacques Rousseau. (1762/1979). *Emile, Or On Education*. Translation and notes by Alan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.

developed a secure sense of self. Rousseau aims to avoid this - although, his societal trappings in 18<sup>th</sup> century France are a bit different from our modern ones.

That being said, while Instagram was not present when Rousseau was writing, many of his concerns with society and how society negatively affects the individual are resonant today. Comparing oneself with others grows through childhood and into adulthood, and the prejudices and insecurities of parents are often passed to their children; this appears to have been as true in 18<sup>th</sup> century France as it is today. Rousseau begins with the education of children at birth before children are affected by all the influences that come with society. He writes, "Prejudices, authority, necessity, example, all the social institutions in which we find ourselves submerged would stifle nature in him and put nothing in its place" (*Emile*, 37). This sentence can be found in one of the opening paragraphs of *Emile*, and it is an indicator of the importance Rousseau places on allowing a child's nature to flourish before anything else can take hold of the child; this is a central tenant of his educational philosophy, and it ties into what play must look like for one of his pupils.

The importance of play for a child can be found in Rousseau's description of sense experience, and thus can be directly connected to the development of self-reliance. From infancy through childhood, Rousseau stresses the importance of allowing pupils to run free, to exercise their senses. By senses, he does not merely mean the five senses of sight, taste, touch, smell, and sound. "Sense experience" for Rousseau also refers to physical activity, emotion, and instinct. Being allowed to explore his senses is central to Emile's education because doing so allows him to grow and understand the world around him. Sense experience lays the foundation of Emile's understanding of the world and will later assist him in gaining reason and

strength. In infancy, Rousseau recommends, “When he begins to grow stronger, let him crawl around the room. Let him spread out, stretch his little limbs. You will see them gaining strength day by day” (*Emile*, 60). This form of sense exploration, crawling and stretching, is a form of play: allowing the child to explore on his own and choose what he pleases makes it possible for him to gain strength and develop knowledge of the world for himself.

Thus, playing to develop sense-experience is central to Rousseau’s education. As he famously writes in *The Social Contract*, man is “born free, yet everywhere he is in chains”. To remedy this situation and create good citizens and good men Rousseau argues that children must be allowed to experience life (and everything that entails) for themselves, without molding themselves on the opinions of others. He avoids amour-propre through early intervention, writing “Nature wants children to be children before being men” (*Emile*, 90). Reiterating the importance of allowing children to follow the call of nature, rather than the call of other men, Rousseau argues that the teacher’s role is often to step aside, to step out of the way of nature, or more accurately, to unobtrusively regulate the way children experience nature.

For Rousseau, the teacher is crucial for guiding and responding to the student’s basic genuine needs. Teachers, therefore, should encourage play; they are the ones who leave space for students to run outside and experience answering their own questions through their own playful exploration. Group interaction is minimal in *Emile*’s education until he reaches adolescence and is able to re-engage with society having already established a full and loving relationship with himself. Re-integration into society comes as a natural next step for the pupil; in adolescence, *Emile* becomes increasingly socially motivated, increasingly ready to develop

social connections. This becomes his internal need; if during childhood he has been prepared to meet his needs and not succumb to externally motivated desires, he will be able to re-enter society successfully, ready to engage in genuinely equitable relationships.

One's internal needs do not always correspond with what society tells you is expected; this can be seen in the gender roles that are subliminally reinforced by present-day culture. For example, a little boy in my current Kindergarten class wants to wear nail polish and calls himself a girl. Even at the age of five, this student struggles constantly with the opinions of the other children, making worried statements about what they think of him. The student is experiencing tension between what he truly wants, and what society has told him is "right". Children, Rousseau believes, have a genuine understanding of their true needs, and when this is at odds with what society decrees to be the standard, it creates an internal struggle that a child should not have to face. Rousseau writes, "Forced to combat nature or the social institutions, one must choose between making a man or a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time" (*Emile*, 39). In asking a child to choose before they are ready, or in raising them in such a way where they are expected to both conform to society and to follow their internal drive, creates a consistent internal struggle.

This internal tension, as I reference in the anecdote above, is not uncommon to see in a Kindergarten setting. Children experience difficult (and Rousseau would argue, unnecessary) debates with themselves as they navigate their own needs and society's demands. A child wants to wear pajamas to school, but when they get to school, they are laughed at by their peers. Do they change, or do they continue to wear what is comfortable for them? Rousseau believes that when a child is forced to make a decision such as this, even though it may feel

insignificant to an adult, the child can never truly be happy or comfortable with themselves. He writes, "Swept along in contrary routes by nature and by men, forced to divide ourselves between these different impulses, we follow a composite impulse which leads us to neither one goal nor the other. Thus, in conflict and floating during the whole course of our life, we end it without having been able to put ourselves in harmony with ourselves and without having been good either for ourselves or others" (*Emile*, 41). His educational goal, therefore, is to first teach children how to live for themselves, to experience the good and bad that life has to offer and from a place of self-love and self-assurance. It is only when children have developed a sense of self-security that they will be able to re-join society, now as young adults ready to regard others non-comparatively as equals.

As infants develop their sense experience, they experience the world in a way that adults cannot understand. Rousseau stresses this point, telling us that it is through the experience of making their own choices that children can determine many factors for themselves, such as coming to know their own strengths and weaknesses. When problems are solved for them, children lose a learning opportunity. Rousseau writes, "...the education of man begins at his birth; before speaking, before understanding, he is already learning...But we are hardly aware of what is generally attained, because it is attained without thought and even before the age of reason..." (*Emile*, 62). This acknowledgement that a child cannot fully express what they are feeling indicates that adults must be especially careful before instructing a child, or before making a statement that puts the expectations of society on them.

A child is learning from the moment they begin experiencing the world, and the adults around them most directly influence this education. Rousseau offers advice to a teacher who is

attempting to instruct a student in this way, stating, “Young teacher, I am preaching a difficult art to you, that of governing without precepts and doing everything by doing nothing” (*Emile*, 119). It is here where the child’s ability to choose and exercise their independence comes into play. With the child as a guide, a tutor such as Rousseau can determine who this child will become, how to gently steer them towards traits that encourage self-reliance. Here, play is central to the child’s education, even before the child can express what he is interested or what he needs.

Rousseau’s pedagogical methods are easily connected to a child’s natural desire to explore and play in the world around them. He provides an example that is strikingly similar to a therapy method used with children today, writing, “Why, then, should a child’s education not begin before he speaks and understands, since the very choice of objects presented to him is fit to make him timid or courageous? I want him habituated to seeing new objects, ugly, disgusting, peculiar animals, but little by little, from afar, until he is accustomed to them, and by dint of seeing them handled by others, he finally handles them himself” (*Emile*, 63). Although the child cannot express what makes them afraid or scared or feel nervous, he nevertheless can slowly adapt to novel objects through the method Rousseau describes – not only does the child have control over the pace at which they experience new objects, they are able to become brave, to associate new things with curiosity, not fear. I have followed Rousseau’s methods with a child, who, for example, is afraid of the noise of a flushing toilet. By letting the child slowly go up to the bathroom door, then walk to the seat and explore it, then touch the handle, then finally flush it, they are able to become accustomed to something that is scary for them at

a pace that is comfortable for them while simultaneously learning the importance of resilience and persistence.

The ability to act on one's own choices is very important and remains a central tenet of Rousseau's education strategy. Under Rousseau's tutelage, Emile is provided a great deal of choice. He is allowed to experience the world as he chooses, although there is a significant amount of undetected guidance from Rousseau. In managing Emile's environment Rousseau takes care not to let him destroy anything precious for his freedom, writing, "In leaving children full freedom to exercise their giddiness, it is proper to put away from them everything that could make it costly and to leave nothing fragile and precious within their reach...As for my Emile, whom I am raising in the country, his room will have nothing which distinguishes it from a peasant's. What is the use of decorating it so carefully, since he is going to stay in it so little?" (*Emile*, 93). Rousseau believes that when children are free to play as they want, to do what they want to do, they will likely choose to be outside, to be running, to exercise their senses and build their strength.

For Rousseau, autonomy appears to be deeply tied with self-sufficiency. In providing Emile with the ability to make choices concerning how he fills his day, how he wishes to play and what he wishes to explore, to be free to decorate or destroy his room as he wishes, he is providing Emile with a clear path to independence. By independence, Rousseau means that Emile does not need to rely on anyone else in order to meet his needs. Because he has been allowed freedom to make his own choices and therefore to solve the problems that come with those choices, Emile has a better grasp on what he actually needs as opposed to what he believes he wants. Rousseau writes, "For him, all that he desires is within his reach. Sufficient

unto himself and free of prejudices, on whom will he be dependent? He has arms, health, moderation, few needs, and the means of satisfying them. Nurtured in the most absolute liberty, he conceives of no greater ill than servitude" (*Emile*, 244). An individual who is able to meet his needs for himself is most suited to interact in society; such an individual will not rely on others to define him, because the root of relying on others is so often the feeling that one's desires (which tend to grow and grow) are more important than one's basic needs (which Rousseau thinks are always limited and few).

Rousseau implies that when a person focuses only on what they want or desire, as opposed to what they truly need, they are creating a negative cycle for themselves in which their desires can never be fulfilled. For example, it's a relatively common phenomenon among women I know to spend money on significant amounts of clothing (often when experiencing stress), in order to fulfill a sort of aspirational desire – if life is feeling stressful, then perhaps these clothes will make them feel more beautiful or more appealing in the eyes of others. While this may appear to be a dependence on things, it is, in fact, a dependence on "men"; a dependence on believing that the opinions of others could provide an individual with happiness. Much of present day media is built off this type of wish fulfillment, and this is a foundational subject for Rousseau. He writes, "Society has made man weaker not only in taking from him the right he had over his own strength but, above all, in making his strength insufficient for him" (*Emile*, 84).

This is to say, when a person's wants or desires often are based on what other people tell them they should have, then they are not following their true, most basic instincts. A child wants to run through a puddle not because society tells them that running through a puddle

will bring them happiness or wealth or power – they run through the puddle because it *feels* instinctively joyous. Conversely, if a child plays only the games they have been told are important to play, they will not be participating because they truly want to, but rather to please the adult – in doing so, they are setting themselves up to compare themselves to others. If a child joins a baseball team to make their parent proud, then they will want to be the best, or to stand out among their team to invoke those feelings in their parent. If they play on the team because they feel an internal desire to play, they will focus more on their own reward – that reward being the joy they get when they play. According to Rousseau, it is the role of the adult to avoid placing external pressures on the child that encourage comparison to others.

Play is an inherent, basic, need; in playing, children are allowed to experience fulfilling their internal *needs*. Rousseau writes, “When children’s wills are not spoiled by our fault, children want nothing uselessly. They have to jump, run, and should when they wish. All their movements are needs of their constitution seeking to strengthen itself” (*Emile*, 86). It is the role of the adult to perceive what the student does or does not need; if a child is naturally inclined to meet their internal needs then it is the adult’s role to facilitate an environment in which that child can follow their instincts. A learning environment where a child can easily access the outdoors and engage with the world around them is a learning environment Rousseau would approve of, as it would naturally encourage a child to explore their surroundings, ask questions, and make choices that allow them to feel in control of their education.

A check we often run in behavioral interventions is asking ourselves the question, “What need is this child trying to get met”? A child may be throwing a tantrum that seems to us simply to originate from stubbornness, but there is often an underlying need – positive adult

attention, time outside, something motivating to look forward to. It is the adult role to determine what need has to be met, and to meet the need rather than the behavior. If adults meet needs rather than behaviors, they likely to be met by less resistance from the child; if adults too forcefully attempt to push their own will onto a child, the child will likely respond with challenging behaviors, as they experience the internal tension between wanting to please the adult and wanting to meet their own needs. Rousseau writes, “The worst education is to leave him floating between his will and yours... I would a hundred times prefer it be he [who is the master]” (*Emile*, 91). Rousseau is indicating the importance of a child making their own choices and their own mistakes, allowing them to feel in control so that they are not constantly struggling with how to please both the adult and their own core desires.

The flip side of assisting children to understand their fundamental needs means allowing children to experience the natural consequences of their actions. This is a common teaching and parenting strategy today; allowing a child to experience why a choice should be made rather than making the choice for them. Rousseau additionally states, “...I have already said that your child ought to get a thing not because he asks for it but because he needs it, and do a thing not out of obedience but out of necessity. Thus, the words obey and command will be proscribed from his lexicon, and even more so duty and obligation” (*Emile*, 89). Rousseau believes that while Emile experiences the world as during early childhood, he does not need to worry about the morality of his actions, for nature will show that to him. Rousseau’s primary concern is that Emile experience childhood, not for any future aim, but for the experience of childhood itself.

Emile receives an education that is, to him, self-directed. He finds things he is interested in, such as gardening, and his tutor is there to gently push him towards reasoning through experience and conversation. Rousseau cautions, however, that the tutor or teacher must be aware of their presence and the amount of guidance they provide in order to allow Emile to come to his own conclusions. He believes that it is better to say nothing at all than to give a lesson that affects Emile negatively, writing, "I shall repeat it endlessly: put off, if possible, a good lesson for fear of giving a bad one" (*Emile*, 96). This is reflective of the minimalist approach that Rousseau advocates for a teacher; the teacher should allow the student to play with that which they find interesting, without demanding that they comply with a lengthy list of demands (sit up straight, voice off, calm body, etc.). That is not to say that the teacher is not doing a significant amount of work, or that the student does not have gaping holes of knowledge due to narrow play interests. Rather Rousseau believes that teachers should act from afar, guiding the student towards new topics through pathways they have demonstrated interest in (for example, using a child's interest in a bird to learn about habitats or the science behind flying). This does not mean that the teacher is disengaged – rather, it means that they are allowing the students to ask questions and make mistakes, developing their own method of learning rather than having one set out for them. This not only creates an umbrella of autonomous action (actions of Emile's own choosing), but it also prevents unnecessary rebellious behavior.

Resentment and rebellion, Rousseau believes, come when too little freedom is provided to children to make their own choices. It is the nature of children to run, to explore, to see cause and effect in the world. Therefore, it makes no sense to restrict play and therefore create

a barrier to this exploration. He writes, “The more they are held in check under your eye, the more they are turbulent the moment they get away” (*Emile*, 92). This, of course, is easily proved true in a Kindergarten setting – a teacher walks away from a lunch table and immediately the conversation goes back to whatever was most recently deemed “not appropriate”, with furtive glances cast over at the nearest authority figure, signaling that they are most definitely taking part in a conversation they know they would be asked to stop (again).

Emile does not have this limit placed upon him, but rather experiences this limit through his own choices and the natural consequences of those choices. Rousseau writes of these natural results specifically in terms of Emile breaking furniture or a window, stating, “He breaks the furniture he uses. Do not hurry to replace it for him. Let him feel the disadvantage of being deprived of it. He breaks the windows of his room, let the wind blow on him night and day without worrying about colds... never complain about the inconveniences he causes you, but make him be the one to feel these inconveniences first” (*Emile*, 100). This is how Rousseau intends for Emile to learn that his actions will have consequences – not (on the part of the adult) through lectures or punishment, but rather through observant silence, through allowing Emile to feel exactly what he has caused and then have the internal motivation to correct the situation.

In fully experiencing childhood, in allowing Emile to follow his senses and his core nature, Rousseau emphasizes play. He does not specifically mention play, but he does discuss the games that come with childhood and the pleasure that comes with running and being outside; he believes that allowing children to follow their natural curiosity will lead to a genuine education. Rousseau writes, “Instead of letting him stagnate in the stale air of a room, let him

be taken daily to the middle of a field. There let him run and frisk about; let him fall a hundred times a day. So much the better. That way he will learn how to get up sooner. The well-being of freedom makes up for many wounds" (*Emile*, 78). I am reminded of the representation of school in so many current forms of popular culture –students, sitting at their desks, staring out the window until the bell rings, at which point the students flood out the doors and into the sunshine, smiling and laughing, happy to be free. If Emile, as a student, is allowed to run and explore and, perhaps, fall, he is still learning – he is not developing a negative association with the system of education, because he is choosing the activity.

Many people will stop an activity once they reach a point of difficulty or start to feel they are failing. Rousseau is proposing that if his pupil is given the freedom to run and “fails” by falling to the ground, he will simply get up and try again, because he is determined to fulfil what his nature is calling him to do. Therefore, the pupil won’t grow up with a negative association with falling – he will learn on his own that what we teach in Kindergarten, a “growth mindset” (the ability to keep trying, even when frustrated). He will learn this because he is motivated intrinsically to do so, to follow the basic needs.

Autonomy is centrally important in Emile’s play. Autonomy within Emile’s leisure activities, as I mentioned earlier, is one of the crucial guiding principles for becoming self-assured and independent later in life, as well as for determining the difference between what is a fundamental need and what is a capricious and unnecessary want or a desire. Rousseau writes, “I see little rascals playing in the snow, blue and numb with cold, hardly able to move their fingers. Nothing prevents them from going to get warm; they will have none of it. If they were forced to do so, they would feel the rigors of constraint a hundred times more than they

feel those of the cold. What then do you complain about? Shall I make your child miserable by not exposing him to discomforts he wants to suffer?" (*Emile*, 87). As a teacher who must decide on a nearly hourly basis whether or not to argue about a Kindergartener wearing a coat, I can attest to the validity of this statement. By giving children the ability to decide for themselves what needs or desires they choose to fulfill in their play (in this case, choosing to go inside from the cold), they have the opportunity to learn the positive outcomes and negative consequences of their choices.

Does an adult need to teach a child a lesson when children will learn a lesson for themselves if they feel that the lesson is necessary? More than likely, the child will walk outside, realize that it is actually quite cold outside, and wish that they had brought their jacket, and then the debate will not come up the next time it is requested of them to wear a jacket. The adult has learned this lesson - they remember the feeling from childhood of being too cold and know, from experience, that it is more pleasant to wear a jacket. Rousseau would have us allow children to learn this lesson for themselves, rather than have adults pass on this knowledge to the children without the connection to experience. He writes, "...for children easily forget what they have said and what has been said to them, but not what they have done and what has been done to them" (*Emile*, 100). This is essentially the theory of experiential learning that we use in schools and in therapy practice in modern day, and for Rousseau it is one of the only ways in which he can achieve his goal of helping Emile achieve mature self-love.

Much of a child's modern education, for a variety of reasons, centers around their future. They need to test into college, high school, and even middle school, and they need to do so in order to participate in a career of their parent's choosing. When a child's career choices

are made for them, the pressure on the child from their parent begins early in their education and creates tension around allowing children time to play in school. If the child is spending time playing rather than learning basic addition, will they get into a good elementary school? And if they don't get into a good elementary school, then it can seem their future is torpedoed.

Rousseau's entire educational philosophy is antithetical to this. When discussing his educational aims early in *Emile*, Rousseau writes, "Let my student be destined for the sword, the church, the bar. I do not care. Prior to the calling of his parents is nature's call to human life. Living is the job I want to teach him" (*Emile*, 41). This indicates that parents in 18<sup>th</sup> Century France, and one can assume, throughout time and culture, wish to steer their children in the direction of a future they think is best. Rousseau, however, believes that the focus should be on the present – that in order to have a successful future, to be a fully engaged member of society, childhood must "ripen in children" (*Emile*, 94). How better to allow childhood to ripen in children than through allowing them to engage in the natural activity of childhood – allowing them to play?

The idea, then, is to focus on the present, to allow children to follow their natural inclinations in order to learn "how to live." This idea naturally includes a focus on play, because play is a part of a child's natural inclination. As I mentioned earlier, the centrality of play is repeated often throughout *Emile*, particularly with a focus on exercise. Rousseau connects joyful exercise directly with reason, stating, "Exercise his body continually; make him robust and healthy in order to make him wise and reasonable. Let him work, be active, run, yell, always be in motion. Let him be a man in his vigor, and soon he will be one in his reason" (*Emile*, 118). As *Emile* spends time outside, he is naturally drawn to certain subjects, certain areas where he can develop both moral and academic reason.

Rousseau's role as a teacher is to encourage exercise and the interests that naturally follow from it, to guide Emile's playful exercise without being noticed. He deeply believes that avoiding direct lessons (and instead providing) in favor of indirect guidance, he will assist Emile in gaining as much knowledge (more, in fact), than Emile would receive in a "frontal" academic setting. He writes, "At eighteen, one learns in philosophy what a lever is. There is not a little peasant of twelve who does not know how to use a lever better than the Academy's premier expert in mechanics. The lessons pupils get from one another in the school yard are a hundred times more useful to them than everything they will ever be told in class" (*Emile*, 125). Again, this observation can be attributed to Emile's ability to follow what he is interested in; exploring the use of levers feels completely natural to him, although there may be adult guidance. This returns to the intersection of play and curiosity that develops even in infancy.

Emile's ability to independently seek out information and satisfy his curiosity will serve him well in adulthood, as Rousseau writes, "He will not stupidly question others about everything he sees, but he will examine it himself and will tire himself out to discover what he wants to learn before asking" (*Emile*, 161). The ceaseless desire to learn more, to self-sufficiently attempt to answer one's own questions, is a goal of Emile's guided yet independent education. He is able to solve his own problems, not rely on others to do so for him, because he has developed the knowledge that he is *capable* of doing so, that he can come upon the answer if he searches long enough. Interestingly, this is an important trait when applying for jobs today. Being a "problem solver", or finding solutions independently, is considered highly valuable in the work place, and many teachers plan activities to encourage this independence in their students.

Rousseau's belief in the importance of cultivating curiosity, self-sufficiency, and self-assurance through providing children time and space to run, to play, and to follow their own interests comprises the entire foundation of many educational practices today. There are many pieces of Rousseau's philosophy that can be found in a Kindergarten classroom at the EEU. All children have interests, all children want to play, whatever that play may look like. Rousseau presents a world in which typically developing children could be so secure in their interests, so able to explore their curiosities, that they could be absolutely confident in their own identities as individuals. The question, then, that must be explored in my final chapter, is whether this is possible for children with disabilities, children whose exploration or play looks completely different than Emile's.

### **Chapter 3: Dewey, Community, and the Development of Meaning Through Social Interactions**

In an inclusive Kindergarten classroom, instructors work to provide students with disabilities modifications that assist them to get the most they can out of their education. These modifications vary from larger or spring-loaded scissors for those with fine motor needs to frequent breaks outside in order to meet gross motor or sensory needs. Surprisingly frequently, children in the class are able to guide the instructor to a modification that is helpful for them. For example, we recently had a child who ran to the front of the circle every day and stood in front of the teacher, yelling at the top of his lungs in order to attempt to teach the lesson. In observing this pattern, the teachers created a modification in which the student now gets to sit up front next to the teacher, provided that the student is listening and not “teaching”. Often, the children can show you their own behavioral modification, as long as the teachers are watching and listening carefully to them; in this particular case, and in so many others, the student was demonstrating to the teacher what they needed to succeed.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey illuminates the many dualisms that detract from education, cautioning educators to not fall prey to these polarizing ideas and providing some solutions for how to overcome them when they do. A central dualism that Dewey works to identify is that of the individual vs. society. According to this dualism, social understandings and interests and individual understandings and interests are separate realms that must first be individually cultivated and then later connected, often in ways that are artificial. Identifying dualisms and exploring pedagogical methods that avoid them is central to Dewey’s philosophy of education. Curricular and behavioral modifications, such as moving a student to the front of the classroom, are one way to overcome the dualism between individuals and society – this

particular modification allows the student to interact with the group during circle time in a way that is beneficial for all. It is the responsibility of the instructors to guide the child's natural inclinations to increase their engagement in classroom settings and thus help insure their later success in educational environments.

Dewey's philosophy of education in *Democracy and Education* casts a wide net around the experience of education for individuals – both as they experience it on their own and, in particular, how they experience education in groups. Dewey introduces his philosophy by immediately placing individuals into society, into their social groups, experiencing renewal and continuity in transmission of values and ideals by communication. He emphasizes that society itself exists in this continuity of experience, that “life” itself “denotes the whole range of experience...customs, institutions, beliefs, victories and defeats, recreations and occupations” (*D&E*, 2)<sup>2</sup>. This renewal is “not automatic” (*D&E*, 3), and so, all societies have education as a necessity of maintaining this process of renewal.

The individual, therefore, cannot be entirely removed from their social context. Belonging to a group is not only our natural inclination, it can be a source of strength. Dewey argues that meaning is social, writing, “When the acquiring of information and of technical intellectual skill do not influence the formation of a social disposition, ordinary vital experience fails to gain in meaning...” (*D&E*, 9), and later on stating that it is the “necessity of a social environment to give meaning to habits formed” (*D&E*, 181). The experience of interacting with

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations in this chapter are taken from *Democracy and Education*. Citation below.  
John Dewey. (1916/1944/1997). *Democracy and Education: An Introduction To the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Free Press.

social groups thus helps individuals create their identity, because group interactions help individuals find meaning in their beliefs, likes, and dislikes. By the time children start school, their social interactions already have taught them the meaning of many things. They have developed meaning through their interactions with their parents, their siblings, anyone who has come into their rapidly expanding world. Entering the school environment, students start to experience more and different kinds social interactions. With this new environment and these increased and varied interactions come opportunities to reflect on, enrich, and perhaps critique the meanings they bring with them to school. Dewey writes, "...it is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment" (*D&E*, 20). It is through the school environment that the dualism between individuals and society can be overcome, if educators are actively aware of its existence, understanding that learning is an innately social act.

Dewey continues, writing, "...the social environment forms the mental and emotional disposition of behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses, that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences" (*D&E*, 16). The individual student, therefore, is developing their understanding of the world around them through their interactions with their social environment. Social interactions have the ability to create social norms, to determine what is valued, what is important. Families, teachers and peers all have the responsibility to communicate these social norms to one another and to mutually develop their understanding of these norms. Individuals, of course, have thoughts and

experiences that are unique to themselves; however, it is through their interactions with others that their understanding of their thoughts and experiences is deepened.

Indeed, to communicate one's experience with one's social group "is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected" (*D&E*, 5). We see the importance of expanding our understanding of the world (around us) through social interaction on a daily basis; I am reminded of my own upbringing in a rural community, where I interacted with almost no people of color on a day to day basis. My close friend who was raised in New York city had an opposite experience; she was one of the only white females in her Kindergarten class. Therefore today, we have differing levels of comfort in talking about issues of race; it is something I have actively had to seek out through education. My social group was homogenous, and this was reflected in my knowledge and comfort with issues of racial inequity and diversity; my social group shaped my individual experience just as it shaped my close friend's individual experience.

As I have grown older, my interactions with a variety of social groups have expanded the meaning I am able to construct around this issue. My social interactions expanded during college, and I met new people. Because the people who surrounded me prioritized equity, my own understanding of this equity expanded, as well as allowed me to have a more critical and complex view on the subject. The sharing of an experience with another is a potential antidote to what we refer to today as the "echo chamber" effect, in which an individual's social group reinforces a homogeneity of experience and understanding. Thus, their ideas are never

challenged, and they become more convinced that what they believe is the correct thing, and their attitude toward the subject grows increasingly rigid.

Diverse and plentiful social interactions are the conditions under which individual understanding develops. Humans are consistently developing meaning and learning through their interactions with others – this is as true for students and their teachers as it is for students with other students. In reference to this, Dewey writes: “This does not mean the teacher is to stand off and look on; the alternative to furnishing ready-made subject matter...is not quiescence, but participation, sharing, in an activity. In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher...” (*D&E*, 160). An important facet of overcoming the dualism between the individual and society is the willingness of educators to understand that they are continuously constructing meaning with their students. Teachers are responsible for building and curating an environment where the construction of meaning also is happening between students. This allows for expanded horizons for both the student and teacher as they come to new perspectives.

Dewey defines communication early in *Democracy and Education*, writing, “Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession” (9). Dewey’s definition of communication is seen in any class with group discussions. When students come to class having done the reading, they can share their personal experience as it connects to what they read, which then allows the instructor to clarify points as needed; all of this communication builds meaning for the group as a whole.

Class-wide discussions in which students and their instructor construct and clarify meaning together is one way in which the dualism between individual and society can be

disrupted. Dewey emphasizes that a collaborative approach is essential to an educative experience that is based in continuous growth, writing, "...education is not an affair of 'telling' and being told, but an active and constructive process..." (D&E, 38). It, therefore, is essential that education is an intentional exchange in which individuals are actively responding to one another. This kind of responsiveness is not imitation, but rather an observation of what the people around you are doing and an intelligent response to this action. Dewey provides us with the example of rolling a ball to a child who then rolls the ball back in order to allow you to repeat your action. He writes, "The whole situation requires that each should adapt his action in view of what the other person has done and is to do" (D&E, 35). This illustrates the inherently interactive aspect of learning present in all productive social interactions; the individual chooses their actions in response to the actions of those around them.

The creation of meaning that happens between individuals and their social groups is an important form of growth. Growth is a central tenet of Dewey's definition of education. He refers to the centrality of growth in his definition of education repeatedly throughout *Democracy and Education*, stating at the outset that "Education is thus a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating, process" (D&E, 10). He believes, therefore, that while education can be used to improve specific talents, certainly, the goal of education can be found within education itself, in the increasing addition of meaning to the human experience.

Dewey compares his idea that education is growth with the philosophy of Froebel. Dewey praises specific aspects of Froebel's educational strategy, writing, "...his loving attention to [children], and his influence in inducing others to study them, represent perhaps the single most effective force in modern educational theory in effecting widespread acknowledgement

of the idea of growth" (*D&E*, 58). He continues on, however, to express where Froebel went wrong, writing, "He failed to see that growing is growth, developing is development, and consequently placed the emphasis on the completed project" (*D&E*, 58). Thus, Dewey reminds us that when we focus on an end goal, a completed project, we lose sight of the purpose of education for children. When we focus on distant aims and outcomes detached from current processes, a dualism of mind and matter is reinforced, which then leads to a static method of education.

Thus, education for Dewey is a life-long social function, an "active and constructive process" (*D&E*, 38). When education is concrete and rigid, when it is focused exclusively on meeting distant outcomes and goals, it becomes rooted either in the present, or else in the future. Outcomes-based education does not see that the educational decisions we make today actively roll into the future. Dewey writes, "If education is growth, it must progressively realize present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements. Growing is not something which is completed in odd moments; it is a continuous leading into the future" (*D&E*, 56).

Dewey's idea is as relevant in my work with kindergarteners as it is with middle school students. When students are actively engaged with the work they are taking part in, when they seek to complete the work because they want to rather than because they feel they must meet an imposed consequence or reward, the most gains are seen. For teenagers working on their mental health treatment, we see much more progress on development of feelings identification and coping skills when they are in a program that resonates with their identities – group work, climbing wall therapy, a ropes course – the pedagogical strategy changes depending on the

child. The common theme, however, is that when a student is actively engaged in education in a way that directly responds to their present needs, their educational experience is enriched.

That is not to say, however, that the educator should cultivate an environment based solely around what a child is interested in. Education is not merely designed around individual interests, for that would reinforce the dichotomy between individual interests and social interests; the environment should instead be designed to encourage social interactions that allow for meaningful discovery. Environments that are rich in social interactions will productively direct an individual student's interests. The educator's role, in Dewey's eyes, is to encourage multiple interactions between different students - this will allow for an increasingly complex and critical creation of meaning for these students in a variety of subject areas.

Introducing play into the classroom setting, Dewey writes, "It is not enough just to introduce plays and games, handwork and manual exercises. Everything depends upon the way in which they are employed" (*D&E*, 196). If a learning environment is created with socially constructed discovery in mind, then the learning environment itself stimulates a process of discovery that invests the child in learning. The more a child is focused on socially engaging activities that are flexible and that allow for exploration and the development of curiosity, the more actively children will learn and retain information. Creating such learning environments is more than simply good teaching, according to Dewey: it is a moral imperative. Students learn and create meaning through interacting with others, through environments in which they come to their own conclusions through collaboration. An environment in which a student is isolated from their peers or from the ability to explore what they find interesting would keep them from this creation of meaning. To go even further, an environment in which a student is forced to

learn specific information keeps that student from experiencing the joy of discovering and learning – it would, in the long term, remove the desire to learn. Dewey writes, “That education is literally and all the time its own reward means that no alleged study or discipline is educative unless it is worthwhile in its own immediate having” (*D&E*, 109). Creating an environment where socially constructed discovery is prioritized is necessary for creating life-long learners.

Play is an important method for overcoming the individual and society dualism. Dewey helps us see the importance of integrating play into a classroom setting, starting at a young age and lasting through the child’s education. Dewey writes, “When exercises which are prompted by these instincts are part of the regular school program, the whole pupil is engaged, the artificial gap between life in school and out is reduced...” (*D&E*, 195). This artificial gap between life in school and life out of school is detrimental for students, especially low-income students, students of color, or any student who is facing more pressing demands outside the walls of the school building. The dichotomy created between “school life” and “real life” does students a disservice and is unnecessary when one considers that a child’s natural interests can be harnessed to create learning opportunities. Play can act as the intersection between “school life” and “real life”, and that makes it a powerful pedagogical tool.

Dewey acknowledges the reasons that participating in play is often not prioritized in a school setting, writing, “Doubtless the fact that children normally engage in play and work out of school has seemed to many educators a reason why they should concern themselves in school with things radically different. School time seemed too precious to spend in doing over again what children were sure to do any way” (*D&E*, 195). However, this is placing recreational activities and “school” activities such as reading, writing, and spelling into a false dualism that

must be thoughtfully re-organized by educators. Education that actively overcomes the dualism between individuals and society is an education that actively engages students and creates an environment in which they will effectively grow and flourish, and children often provide their own answers to what will most actively engage them. A child watching ants on the playground and bringing their friends over to observe is developing questions and deepening their understanding of the natural world; they are learning, and they are actively engaged in play with others. A child's intrinsic interests in collaboration with others is educative, and it is *also* play. When playing with other children, a child is fulfilling multiple educational functions; they are learning about appropriate social interactions, they are creating and discovering things that become actively enjoyable – this is education at its highest potential.

Play, as Dewey states, becomes the key to creating an association not only between education and “real life”, but also between education and pleasure; it is a necessary tool for overcoming the dualism between the individual and society that works to satisfy multiple goals at once. He writes, “Education has no more serious responsibility than making adequate provision for enjoyment of recreative leisure; not only for the sake of immediate health, but still more if possible for the sake of its lasting effect upon habits of mind” (205), and continues, stating, “Skill and information about materials, tools, and laws of energy are acquired while activities are carried on for their own sake. The fact that they are socially representative gives a quality to the skill and knowledge gained which makes them transferable to out-of-school situations” (*D&E*, 205). Introducing play into school settings, therefore, fulfills many important requirements: students are engaged in activities that are enjoyable and make learning a habit, and that allow individuals to interact with and learn from, others. Playing as a form of

education allows students to bring their “real life” into the classroom and provides them with education that is lasting, meaningful, and significant for their lives.

When teachers develop mutually educative relationships with their students, the overall environment of the classroom improves; engagement increases and behavioral management in the sense of enforcing externally-imposed rules decreases. Dewey writes, “Activity carried on under conditions of external pressure or coercion is not carried on for any significance attached to the doing. The course of action is not intrinsically satisfying; it is a mere means for avoiding some penalty, or for gaining some reward at its conclusion. What is inherently repulsive is endured for the sake of averting something still more repulsive...” (*D&E*, 204). It is not difficult to imagine the difference between a classroom in which each student is actively invested in an activity that has the potential to be collaborative – playing with sand, building with blocks, pouring water down a water table – and a classroom in which each student is at a table, memorizing sight words. There is a logical conclusion which Dewey has observed in his own experience, stating “Experience has shown that when children have a chance at physical activities which bring their natural impulses into play, going to school is a joy, management is less of a burden, and learning is easier” (*D&E*, 194). This, again, indicates the importance of the educator guiding students towards activities that connect with their lived experience and allow them to learn from and grow with others. If students are given opportunities to participate in play-centric activities in school that are both joyous and collaborative, then the potential for overcoming the dualism between individual and society is massive.

Dewey argues that any activity that children wish to actively engage in should be brought into the classroom. He writes, “To charge that the various activities of gardening,

weaving, construction in wood, manipulation of metals, cooking, etc., which carry over these fundamental human concerns into school resources have a merely bread and butter value is to miss their point” (D&E, 200). It is through active collaborative engagement with an activity that children are able to come up with their own ideas and potential solutions. A mark of a high-quality early childhood classroom on the ECERS scale includes accessible collections of natural objects and living things that spur unplanned conversations on scientific topics, such as animal or plant life. Discussing the benefits of teaching gardening, Dewey writes, “Instead of the subject matter belonging to a peculiar study called botany, it will then belong to life, and will find, moreover, its natural correlations with the facts of soil, animal life and human interest which may be pursued for the sake of discovery...” (D&E, 200). Students who are provided the opportunity to explore and engage with the world around them on their own terms associate education with personal discovery, rather than with stipulated learning.

Classroom environments that provide rich opportunities for play are directly connected to the development of positive and productive attitudes of individuals and social groups. “The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs creates for all a new and broader environment. Common subject matter accustoms all to a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon than is visible to the members of any group while it is isolated” (D&E, 21). As students are allowed to engage with what interests them most, they begin to associate school with fascinating discovery and personal growth. So too, the environment of the classroom allows for the mutual creation of the social group. Through creating an environment of inter-connected individuals, classrooms can become powerful;

there is room for the development of a community that includes individuals of a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and ability levels.

When reflecting back on situations in which I feel as though I have learned something and have increased my knowledge, there is generally an anecdote I can reach for that I associate with the lesson. This indicates that the majority of my learning has occurred in relationships, in tandem with others; and that as I have collaborated with others, I have grown. Relationships Dewey believes, are, necessary for the education of individuals; these relationships are not only student to student, but also student to teacher, and teacher to student. As students and teachers develop relationships as mutual observers and educators, social inclusive and growth-focused groups can develop in the classroom. In this way, the process of education can truly function as a “bringing up”, a nurturing of ideas, encouraging life-long discovery and increasing understanding for all.

## Chapter 4: Play and Special Needs Children in Inclusive Classrooms — Comparing Rousseau and Dewey

### Introduction

On any given day at the Experimental Education Unit (EEU), the Kindergarten sandbox is filled with a large number of children with varying ability levels. Each child is engaged in some sort of play; potentially with others, potentially alone. Sand is dug, piled, and occasionally thrown. Play in the sandbox offers a social experience for children who are typically developing as they learn new and varied ways to build and destroy; play offers children with special needs an opportunity to explore their natural instincts and curiosity and allows them time to develop their understanding of the world around them. These benefits from play hold true even when flipped, as children with special needs learn new ways to construct and children who are typically developing independently follow their internal desires. All children are equally participating in the sandbox play; they are all members of the same community. Play experiences such as these can and often do satisfy overall goals for childhood education discussed by Rousseau and Dewey.

Before considering the relevance of Rousseau and Dewey for special needs children in inclusive classrooms, I will first review their ideas regarding the role of play for the education of typically-developing children. I then will argue that what Rousseau and Dewey say about typically developing children can be applied to special needs children in inclusive classrooms. To support my claim, I will provide examples that illustrate, from each philosopher's perspective, why play is pedagogically and morally necessary for educating special needs

children. To deepen my understanding of the philosophers' ideas, I will discuss three similarities that they share. I also will discuss four issues on which they differ.

### **Review of Rousseau: Play & Typically-developing Children**

As I discussed in Chapter Two, Rousseau is primarily concerned with his student Emile, whom he removes from society at a young age in order to prevent him from developing *amour propre* during adolescence. Born of deep insecurities, *amour propre* is the urge to compare oneself to others. It is of utmost importance to Rousseau to avoid *amour propre*. Instead of *amour propre*, Rousseau emphasizes the importance of cultivating a mature self-love, one that develops through cultivating self-sufficiency and true knowledge of oneself and one's true desires.

Rousseau designs a pedagogical method to be utilized for his hypothetical pupil, Emile; this method prioritizes the development of Emile's natural senses first. Only after Emile's sense knowledge has matured does Rousseau recommend that the teacher begin education on more formal subjects, such as language arts or math. In his introduction to *Emile*, Alan Bloom writes, "The tutor's responsibility is, in the first place, to let the senses develop in relation to their proper objects; and secondly to encourage the learning of the sciences as the almost natural outcome of the use of the senses" (*Emile*, 9). Bloom goes on to state, "The tutor and his helpers must disappear, as it were, and everything that happens to the child must seem to be an inevitable effect of nature" (*Emile*, 11). The end goal of this pedagogical strategy is for Emile to engage in healthy social relationships and exist as a self-confident, fully contributing member of society who cannot be easily influenced by others. However, before he can become such a

figure, Emile must develop a strong and confident sense of self outside of society and the influences of others. This is to be completed before Emile is re-introduced to society and must start with his senses.

Providing children opportunities to explore their sensory world and follow their internal needs helps them develop the self-confidence that mature self-love requires. They learn to separate their more frivolous wants and desires from their true needs, which Rousseau thinks are always limited and few. Rousseau is deeply concerned with allowing children to be children, meaning that they are free to run and play and experience their childhood for as long as possible. Not only does this delay the development of *amour propre*, it also allows children time to explore the world around them and exercise their physical bodies. It is through physical development, Rousseau believes, that a strong foundation for cognitive development is built. Adults who can guide this inherent need for exercise can assist children in developing a strong foundation for understanding the world around them. It is through the structure and cues provided by an adult that a child's physical play can be harnessed into an educative activity. A child running outside may never view their action as a learning opportunity; a teacher can help that child see their running as full of educative moments. The student and teacher can measure the distance the child has run, introduce the child to the concept of inertia or acceleration, take note of the colors or plants around them for a future art project. Additionally, beyond academic topics, children learn through exercise to discern their own needs, strengths, capacities, and limitations.

Rousseau's pedagogical strategy for teaching typically-developing children is easily summarized along these lines: allow children time to explore and experience the world on their

own. It is the role of the teacher to provide an environment in which the child can explore the world in a way that makes all discovery seem completely spontaneous and natural; it is through such natural discovery that curiosity and joy develop. Rousseau writes of Emile, “It belongs to every age, especially his, to want to create, imitate, produce, give signs of power and activity. It will not take two experiences of seeing a garden plowed, sowed, sprouting, and growing vegetables for him to want to garden in his turn” (*Emile*, 98). This is such a common experience when working with children that I can’t imagine an educator who hasn’t witnessed this; it takes all of two minutes of working on an independent task before a child will materialize right behind you, asking questions about what you are doing and why you are doing it. Rousseau would encourage independent discovery in this situation – allow the child to try the task themselves or to use clues about the context and environment to determine an answer.

### **Review of Dewey: Play & Typically-developing Children**

John Dewey’s philosophy also is deeply rooted in typically-developing classrooms today. Whereas Rousseau is concerned about *amour propre*, Dewey is concerned about dualisms that pervade education. He identifies many dualisms in *Democracy and Education* – the dualism of mind v. body, freedom v. discipline, and society v. individual. All of these dualisms, Dewey argues, are harmful to the point of being “evil” (*D&E*, 141), distorting the goal of education, which is to create and nurture life-long learners. When educators think in dualisms or binaries, they are unable to see or address the whole picture or the whole child. It is possible, however, to overcome dualisms. Dewey argues that educators must work to identify binaries, and they must deeply consider ways to avoid, circumvent, or transcend them.

For the purpose of my thesis, Chapter 3 focused on the dualism of individual v. society. Dewey emphasizes that individuals cannot create meaning without social interactions; individuals are born into social groups, and it is through engaging with the social world that individuals come to understand what things mean. Dewey states that too often in education, the individual is expected to cultivate understanding separately from a group. As a consequence, education lacks meaning. For Dewey, education cannot be kept apart from society; individuals would experience only their own thoughts and actions in a vacuum. An isolated individual would not see, hear, or experience anything that gave them additional context, provided additional meaning to their world. Eventually, the goal of education - continuous growth - is disrupted, as there is nothing new, no novel experiences or connections, to nurture that growth.

As individuals interact with their social and physical environment, they are learning. Dewey reminds us that educators are responsible for designing environments that encourage learning. Environments that encourage learning provide opportunities for students to expand and enrich their understanding. He writes, "...it is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment" (*D&E*, 20). The educator, therefore, has the power to construct an environment, which introduces individuals to a broader experience than they previously have had, to include elements that are new and interesting to participants and that help participants connect these elements to their own lives.

In sum, Dewey, argues that developing an idea without the influence of others is impossible – and, more importantly, should not be done. From the outset, Dewey makes it clear that play is a social act, which should be “broad and flexible” in order to create maximum learning opportunities. New and diverse experiences are crucial when helping typically developing children learn through their play. Dewey writes, “Diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought” (*D&E*, 85). Dewey here is referring to stimulation as the give and take between two people engaged in social interaction.

### **Similarities Between Rousseau and Dewey: Play & Typically-developing Children**

Rousseau and Dewey share in an important belief: learning should be fun. Specifically, both believe in the importance of recreative activities and physical exercise for children, as both philosophers see a connection between play and cognitive development. Discussing the importance of allowing children to enjoy their childhood, Rousseau states, “Love childhood; promote its games, its pleasures, its amiable instinct” (*Emile*, 79). Childhood is inherently fun and joyful. When educators are able to incorporate that fun into the classroom, the fun not only becomes educative, it imbues learning with that same sense of joy. In fact, teachers who are able to make learning a pleasure through providing educative structure to childhood instincts are doing more than just creating positive connections to education for children. They are helping their cognitive and physical development. Dewey dedicates a chapter of *Democracy and Education* to the implementation of play in the classroom, writing, “There is no reason, however, for using [plays and games] merely as agreeable diversions. Study of mental life has made evident the fundamental worth of native tendencies to explore, to manipulate tools and

materials, to construct, to give expression to joyous emotion, etc.” (D&E, 195). The need for play is underscored by the fact that both philosophers view it to be an inherent, natural need, and both feel that it is important to incorporate natural proclivities into the school day, rather than fight them. This when then allow for students who are both physically and mentally engaged. When children can follow their natural proclivities, they can more easily be guided by teachers to exercise their cognitive capabilities as well as their physical abilities.

Both Rousseau and Dewey believe that when adults attempt to shape a child’s learning without engaging the child’s natural inclinations, learning becomes forced and leads to a disruption in the child’s positive feelings towards schooling. Children’s interests and curiosities should be considered in the development of curriculum, and it is important that teachers attend to this. This idea can be seen in Rousseau’s demand that children be allowed to “run and jump when they wish”, and in Dewey’s observation that engagement increases when students are involved in activities of their own choosing. This is not to say that children should run free for six hours, Monday through Friday, with no limitations placed on them – it is easy to visualize the chaos that would ensue. What is recommended by both philosophers, instead, is guided play – i.e., play which provides meaning through intentional structure. Rousseau, as a tutor, did nothing unintentionally, from how he furnished Emile’s room (sparsely) to how Emile would fix something he had broken. It is through structured play, developed with the child’s interests in mind, that children can find joy in their schooling.

Both philosophers comment on the struggles that arise for teachers who attempt to enforce rigid standards of behavior without allowing time for play. They also believe that providing children opportunities to play eases behavior management issues. Dewey notes that

play adds joy to education, and Rousseau reminds us that play is directly tied to a child's happiness and natural impulses (*D&E*, 194, *Emile*, 107). Play is a time when children are not as obviously under the constraint of adult rules or limits that are disconnected from the children's interests, which means there will be little argument during play-time. Including "learning time" in a child's "fun time" is an important tool for educators as well as children, with positive benefits for both. The child perceives that they have additional freedom; for example, a child chooses to play with Legos during free choice time during Kindergarten. This is an activity they are not able to do during academic time, so they feel they are doing something that is just "for fun". A teacher, then, is able to build and teach shapes, or to bring over a peer so that both children can work on the skill of compromise. Play-time, then, provides the ideal learning environment; occupied by what they are doing, the student playing at their activity of choice often does not realize they are engaged in an educative experience.

Both Rousseau and Dewey acknowledge that including significant amounts of play in the curriculum is not always accepted. This was true in 17<sup>th</sup> century France, true in early 19<sup>th</sup> century America, and is still true today. Rousseau writes, "You are alarmed to see him consume his early years in doing nothing. What? Is it nothing to be happy? Is it nothing to jump, play, and run all day? He will never be so busy in his life" (*Emile*, 107), while Dewey states, "Doubtless the fact that children normally engage in play and work out of school has seemed to many educators a reason why they should concern themselves in school with things radically different. School time seemed too precious to spend in doing over again what children were sure to do anyways" (*D&E*, 195). However, both philosophers counter these doubts with the benefits that play provides for students. Rousseau believes that play encourages curiosity and

teaches independence and also helps students discover their own limits. Dewey believes, similarly, that play engages students in meaningful and joyous academic time.

Both philosophers advocate for teachers to carefully design an environment for typically developing students in order to help them become self-confident active participants in their learning. Dewey writes, "The child has specific powers; to ignore that fact is to stunt or distort the organs upon which his growth depends. The adult uses his powers to transform his environment, thereby occasioning new stimuli which redirect his powers and keep them developing" (*D&E*, 50). He recommends, therefore, that the adult observe the child's strengths and interests and develop an environment that plays to these interests while also allowing those same interests to expand. For example, a child who watches ants outside may be interested in the metamorphosis of a butterfly, which then becomes an interesting science lesson on life cycles.

Rousseau recommends that the teacher engage with the student, assisting the student in the work they are undertaking. This will both serve to make the work manageable for the child's ability level and also will help the student follow through on their interest. Writing about Emile becoming interested in gardening, Rousseau writes, "I work with him, not for his pleasure, but for mine; at least he believes it to be so. I become his gardener's helper. Until he has arms I plow the earth for him. He takes possession of it by planting a bean in it...we come every day to water the beans; with transports of joy we see them sprout...I make him feel that he has put his time, his labor, his effort, finally his person there..." (*Emile*, 98). Emile, then, is able to experience the beginning, middle, and end of his labor, and feel that he was wholly

responsible for the project. This builds the self-confidence that makes it possible for him to successfully undertake further, more ambitious projects.

### **Differences Between Rousseau and Dewey: Play & Typically-developing Children**

There are many places where Dewey and Rousseau agree about a foundational point but differ about how to achieve their common aim. For example, both philosophers agree that social interactions are necessary for development, but they disagree about how and when social interactions should occur. Rousseau believes that the individual should be removed from social interactions during childhood in order to avoid the tendency to compare oneself to others. Comparing oneself to others, Rousseau observes, leads to jealousy and insecurity. In making it possible for a child to explore his natural inclinations without the pressures of society, Rousseau believes he is allowing the child time to fully experience childhood. The child is allowed to find out independently what his capacities are with the guidance of his tutor. After Emile has developed confidence in his own abilities to meet his true needs, he can follow his naturally occurring adolescent desire to form social connections. Because Emile does not compare himself to others, he can build healthy relationships.

Conversely, Dewey believes that to remove a child from social interactions is not only impossible but also reinforces the dualism between individuals and society. Indeed, the idea of removing a child from their social world is directly contradictory to his assertion that children learn to understand meaning through their interactions and experiences with others. Dewey responds directly to Rousseau's assertion that children should begin their development outside of a social group, writing, "In making [Emile] more self-reliant, it may make him more self-

sufficient; it may lead to aloofness and indifference. It often makes an individual so insensitive in his relations to others as to develop an illusion of being able to really stand and act alone—an unnamed insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remediable suffering of the world” (*D&E*, 44). Isolation, for Dewey, leads to an unrealistic world view, in which individuals believe they can act without consideration for others, or without their assistance. In fact, according to Dewey, social isolation is more than unrealistic – it is dangerous. A government leader, for example, who believed they could act unilaterally, alone, without consulting those around them, would be suffering from this “unnamed insanity” and could bring about truly catastrophic events.

Additionally, the philosophers differ about how teachers can help children develop a secure identity. Rousseau states repeatedly that when individuals are influenced by society starting at a young age, they are likely to experience an intense internal struggle that places them at odds with themselves. It is society that corrupts our internal needs. Rousseau writes, “The education of society...is fit only for making double men, always appearing to relate everything to others and never relating anything except to themselves alone...From these contradictions is born the one we constantly experience within ourselves” (*Emile*, 41). He believes that introducing society’s influence too early in a child’s life will set them up for a lifetime of comparison to others, never feeling whole or secure in their identity. For Rousseau, an adult who was never able to resolve the tension between societal pressures and their internal needs is in danger of deep unhappiness. This is most impactfully seen, today, in the suicide rates of adolescents and adults who have identities out of the “societal norm”, such as those in the LGBTQ+ community, or foster children. Rousseau would believe that these children

were, from early childhood, constantly in situations that made them feel insecure or inferior; this would lead to *amour propre* in adolescence and a lack of ability to express one's true self.

Dewey, conversely, believes that without social engagement, children will not be able to fully develop their identity. Further, their experiences will lack meaning and their friendships will be shallow. All these things (identity, experience, and relationships) are built through the social world and school presents a critical opportunity to build that world. Rather than being concerned about corruption from people in the child's life, Dewey believes that a child – even an infant – is constantly gaining knowledge and experience from other humans. It therefore would be morally wrong to keep a child from society, as this would deprive the child of opportunities to understand what things mean and to deepen their perception of the world. Dewey writes, "...social environment forms the mental and emotional disposition of behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses, that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences" (*D&E*, 16). How can an individual know who they are if they have not seen how others behave and interact with the world and considered the actions of others in comparison with their own responses? It is through the social environment, Dewey believes, that individuals develop their knowledge of who they are.

The difference in belief regarding the timing of social interaction leads us to another area of disagreement for the philosophers: the role of group-learning in their pedagogic strategies. For Rousseau, group learning during childhood would be a foolish exercise. Rather than serve as an opportunity to grow, group learning would create a plethora of insecurities for the child as he encounters temptations to compare himself to other students. According to Rousseau, a child should be engaged in individual learning – exploring their natural instincts

with the guidance of a teacher, rather than playing with a group. The student will then be able to avoid the insecurity of *amour propre* in adolescence, when group learning becomes relevant, and instead successfully participate in a group setting without feeling “less than” the other students.

Dewey, on the other hand, would applaud the use of group learning in any educational setting during childhood, with students referring to each other to expand upon the meaning of their ideas. Playing in groups, to Dewey, begins in early childhood. Take, for example, an infant at a park with other children of the infant’s same age. As the child takes in her environment, she is also observing the actions of other children. When the young child references her own behavior to the behavior of other children, she contextualizes her actions and thereby understands what can be done in the outside world. This broadens her horizons in important ways. Dewey would bring this important meaning-making activity into a classroom setting, believing that students who are able to play and work in groups will gain additional understanding that they could not find on their own.

Another way in which pedagogic strategies differ for Rousseau and Dewey can be found in the level of independence of a student’s play. Each philosopher thinks play is a natural impulse that adds to a student’s happiness and overall education. However, Dewey views play as a constructive social activity, while Rousseau believes that playing alone, with the guidance of a tutor, is most constructive. This difference influences their respective pedagogical strategies for implementing play in an educational setting. For Rousseau, the social aspect of play is not educative. Rather, what the pupil experiences internally makes play educative. Describing how infants explore the world, he writes, “When he begins to grow stronger, let him

crawl around the room. Let him spread out, stretch his little limbs. You will see them gaining strength day by day” (*Emile*, 60). As a child plays, they are learning the boundaries of their own strength and discovering new challenges, then determining how to overcome them. This, for Rousseau, should be an independent exercise. By contrast, Dewey would advise teachers to include as many group activities as possible. Through group interaction, play becomes meaningful and educative for individuals.

### **Play and Special Needs Children in Inclusive Classrooms**

Both philosophers’ arguments about the educative role of play for typically developing children can and do pertain to students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. I will provide some examples that illustrate the relevance of each philosopher’s ideas for special needs children. I then will compare and contrast their ideas in order to deepen my understanding of why their educational philosophies are helpful for special education.

### **Dewey: Play and Special Needs Children in Inclusive Classrooms**

From Dewey’s philosophical perspective, the social environment in which students are educated creates an important opportunity for students with special needs to be members of a social group. Play is important for membership in a group, and membership in a group is important for inclusion. Dewey writes, “A being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account” (*D&E*, 12). As typically developing students experience an environment designed to include children with special needs, a variety of ability levels becomes the norm; children with special needs thus are not

targets or rare objects of fascination. Children with special needs who play with typically developed children benefit from diversifying their understanding of the world through a wider variety of relationships. For a student with special needs who has potentially never been on a “play date” before, this can teach new skills such as what type of physical touch different friends like, or how to ask for help from an adult when an idea is confusing. Play also allows typically developing children to get to know special needs children as whole individuals, not as simply “markers” of “difference”.

Dewey’s ideas concerning the importance of social interactions for learning applies to inclusive classrooms. An example can be seen in a classroom that routinely rotates play equipment in order to continuously capture the interest of students. For example, in a Kindergarten classroom at the Experimental Education Unit, you will find a dramatic play area with a variety of costumes, a block area, a reading area, and an art area. The blocks will be switched out for train tracks within a few weeks as the number of children who play in that area begins to dwindle, and soon, the children who were recently building sky-scrapers (to be destroyed by dinosaurs) are now constructing elaborate train tracks through an imaginary planet (likely also inhabited by dinosaurs). With each play area and each change of materials, the children learn new skills and new ways to use tools. They also will improve the way they interact with one another.

Children playing in a group together learn each other’s strengths and weaknesses and are able to develop empathy and understanding for each other through their interactions. A function of autism, in some cases, is dramatic and unexplained mood swings. In our Kindergarten classroom at the EEU several weeks ago, a child with autism was having a difficult

morning, crying and banging their head on the floor. They were not able to use their voice or adaptive speech technology device (a talker) to tell the adults what was wrong., Another student, typically-developing, came over and sat on the ground by her upset peer. She watched for a moment, and then jumped up and ran to get a toy that spins and plays music. She proudly placed it in front of her crying peer and told the teachers, “He likes this”. The crying child sat up, and after a few moments, began to spin the ball. Both children sat together for a while, engaged in a play of a different sort than you would expect to observe in a Kindergarten classroom of typically developed children. This sort of play, however, clearly represents Dewey’s idea that creating a diverse social environment is important.

### **Rousseau: Play and Special Needs Children in Inclusive Classrooms**

In an inclusive classroom it is easy to see Rousseau’s philosophy and pedagogical strategies in action. Rousseau’s assertion that the child must consistently be provided the space and time to “exercise his body continually” is directly applicable to students with all levels of ability (*Emile*, 118). The idea of turning energy and exercise into knowledge of self can easily be harnessed during the school day. Rather than expecting children to sit still for six hours a day, (which Dewey would also take issue with), allowing students breaks or including physical movement into the lesson itself becomes an important pedagogical strategy that not only will keep children engaged but also will prevent challenging behaviors. Children with special needs often need gross motor movement; they need to run, to be squeezed in a tight hug, to jump on a trampoline. Rousseau would observe that potentially, play looks different for a child with disabilities than it does for a typically-developing child. For example, if a child with autism is

fixated on ferry boats and views play as sitting and memorizing ferry schedules, then this play should be incorporated into the child's day. If he is provided the opportunity to observe ferries, to build a miniature model of a ferry boat and memorize the schedule, then he is learning a functional skill through his play that can potentially help him with his future; he is developing his own self-confidence and self-efficacy through this process.

A teacher in an inclusive environment must shape their pedagogical strategies in ways that are highlighted by Rousseau. It is important for teachers to remember the importance of asking a student further questions in order to allow them sufficient space to explain their thinking. Rousseau reminds us that the teacher's role is to "...put off, if possible, a good lesson for fear of giving a bad one" (*Emile*, 96). For example, if a student says, "My friend is a baby", pointing at a child with a disability, it is important not to scold the child by saying that his comment is wrong or rude. Rather, explore with the child why they are saying that their friend with a disability is a "baby". By asking a question, you will discover in many situations that the child is thinking something completely different from what you initially believed (for example, "He is 5 and I am 5 and a half", rather than "Because he needs more help than me"). Asking questions of the student rather than immediately providing a lesson or an answer allows the educator's perspective and ideas to permeate as little of the child's understanding as possible and helps the child develop their own ideas with minimal influence from others.

Rousseau repeatedly reminds us to "let childhood ripen" in order to strengthen the child's ability to love themselves later in life (*Emile*, 94). This is as important for children with special needs as it is for typically developing children, especially as children with special needs have their entire educational experience structured around goals. These goals are laid out for

them in their Individualized Education Plan, or IEP. The goals in an IEP can be academic, social/emotional, or functional and skill-based (communication or fine motor skills, for example). IEPs are federally mandated when a student qualifies for special education and are created by a team consisting of the student, the student's parents, a special education teacher, a general education teacher, related service providers if needed, and a school employee who is well-informed about the future educational implications of an IEP and the school's ability to fulfill its goals. An IEP, therefore, is an incredibly collaborative document. It is intended to assist a student with special needs with meeting their academic goals.

IEP goals are created with the intent of providing children with special needs the best possible education, in a setting that allows them the appropriate level of support to meet their goals. Rousseau, of course, would take issue with such an elaborate method to assure a quality education for students with special needs; the number of voices contributing to the creation of IEP goals alone is problematic for his philosophy. To him, there is a clear solution to providing a child with the best possible education: time away from the society that created this IEP process. This is not to say he does not want his pupil to have goals. However, before goals can be set, Rousseau first wants his pupil to explore his limitations and abilities on his own. This knowledge helps the pupil become secure in themselves, which in turn helps him effectively participate in an IEP meeting. Self-confidence must come before goal setting. Otherwise, IEP goals would likely be corrupted by comparison to others.

IEPs serve an important role in assisting children with disabilities to receive the assistance they need in school. Rousseau would argue that while providing adequate assistance is incredibly important, it is equally important to allow children with special needs time to play.

Rousseau states, “Since what is wanted is not to make a child out of a child, but a doctor out of a child, fathers and masters can never soon enough scold, correct, reprimand, flatter, threaten, promise, instruct, talk reason” (*Emile*, 94). He reminds us that the adult’s end goals can corrupt their interactions with the child, influencing them to repeatedly attempt to mold the child into what the *adult* hopes the child will become in the future. While it is important to keep future goals in mind, it also is necessary to allow the child time to follow their natural needs, to run and play and jump. Educators should work to set goals for the child; however, they also must allow the child time and space to explore the world around them and learn their capacity as best they can for themselves.

### **Similarity Between Rousseau and Dewey: Play and Special Needs Children in Inclusive Classrooms**

The philosophies of Rousseau and Dewey teach us that when educators see every child as an individual with complex needs and understandings, they will be able to assist the child to learn how to interact with their environment. They also will help the child’s curiosity and self-confidence flourish so that they can explore the world. Both Dewey and Rousseau emphasize that educators should create environments in which the work undertaken by children is related to their interests. This principle applies to special needs children no less than to typically-developing children. Dewey writes that learning, which relates to life, adds meaning to the subject matter and allows for more engaged learning. He states, “...the criterion here must be social. We want the person to note and recall and judge those things which make him an effective competent member of the group in which he is associated with others. Otherwise we

might as well set the pupil to observe carefully cracks on the wall and set him to memorizing meaningless lists of words in an unknown tongue – which is about what we do in fact when we give way to the doctrine of formal discipline. If observing habits of a botanist or chemist or engineer are better habits than those which are thus formed, it is because they deal with subject matter which is more significant in life” (*D&E*, 67). Just as Emile is able to observe the effects of his work in the garden, Dewey’s students also are able to gain more meaning from subjects that they are pulled to.

As Emile is drawn to various activities, his tutor takes the opportunity to shape his interest into something meaningful. For example, when Emile begins to want to draw, Rousseau takes steps to “carefully avoid giving him a drawing master who would give him only imitations to imitate.... I will even divert him from drawing from memory” (*Emile*, 144). Instead, Rousseau directs Emile towards drawing natural objects, such as a tree, or another human, so that he gains “....knowledge of proportions and the taste for the beauties of nature” (*Emile*, 144). Rousseau intentionally begins from a playful, childhood point of interest (drawing) and shapes the exercise to provide an educative result. For both Dewey and Rousseau, then, the subject matter that is most appealing to the pupil can be effectively shaped by educators and can therefore encourage students to actively engage with their own learning.

Additionally, both Rousseau and Dewey support the modification of children’s play. Educators must work, initially, with social interests that are meaningful to the special needs child – they must allow the child to follow their natural inclinations and get to know them as a whole being. Then the teacher will be able to determine what brings that child joy, what problems they are able to solve, and who that child is interested in interacting with. This

teacher intervention will lead to play that is both enjoyable and educative. Rousseau writes, “Respect childhood, and do not hurry to judge it, either for good or for ill. Let the exceptional children show themselves, be proved, and be confirmed for a long time before adopting special methods for them. Leave nature to act for a long time before you get involved with acting in its place, lest you impede it’s its operations” (*Emile*, 107). Rousseau advocates action on the part of the tutor after observing the nature of the child; the play, then, can be changed in a way that follows the desires of the child. Dewey, additionally, argues that modifying the play of a child with special needs is an important method of providing instruction. For both Dewey and Rousseau, modifications must be connected to the child’s demonstrated capacities and interests. Through following the interests of the child and providing adult-created structure, they are transforming play from recreative to educative.

### **Differences Between Rousseau and Dewey: Special Needs Children in Inclusive**

#### **Classrooms**

Both philosophers believe that teachers should recognize that children are unique beings, with their own personalities and desires and needs. Both philosophers further believe that all children should be able to participate as equals in social groups. In order to participate as an equal in a school setting, a student must not only be physically present with the group, they must have an equal voice. Being self-confident active participants in their own learning is the key to achieving this goal. A self-confident active participant in their learning is a student who is connected to their education and who is able to communicate what is meaningful to them with their instructor and other students.

Recall, however, that while both philosophers agree that self-confidence is key for helping children become equal participants in classrooms, they disagree about how self-confidence should be developed. Rousseau believes that individuals must become secure in themselves first, whereas Dewey believes that developing a secure sense of self is a constantly occurring act that develops as children gain understanding of the world around them through their interactions with others. Dewey states, "...it is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment" (*D&E*, 20). Through interacting with a "broader environment", students will begin to build meaningful connections with a variety of peers; they will be able to experience success in these interactions, which will add to their self-confidence. As students interact with others, Dewey believes, they will gain both knowledge about the world around them and also a deeper understanding of their individual strengths and weaknesses. Dewey does not worry about the danger of comparison; he believes that "escaping the limitations of the [familiar] social group" is a positive experience that will lead to expanded horizons.

Rousseau believes that if children are self-confident active participants in their own learning they will become self-assured adolescents who will not succumb to constant comparison to others or feelings of discontent. Children who are directing their education, guided by the eye of a watchful "other", will take ownership over much more than just their education – they will be curious, self-sufficient, and resilient. They will know their exact limits and capabilities. Rousseau writes, "Is there a mass to lift? If he takes too long a lever, he will

waste motion. If he takes too short a one, he will not have enough strength. Experience can teach him to choose precisely the stick he needs" (*Emile*, 133). As children observe problems in their environment and attempt to solve them independently, they are gaining the skills to self-confidently solve problems with minimal assistance throughout their life – a trait of value to any human, at any level of ability.

When considering whether special needs students should become self-confident and active participants in their own learning, the two philosophers' arguments differ. It is easy to say that Dewey would believe students of all abilities, including those with special needs, should take an active role in their education. Education is intended to nurture children to grow, and students can guide their teachers to see what will help them feel successful. All children experience discovery, and all children have interests to follow. Dewey provides us with an example, writing, "The child of three who discovers what can be done with blocks, or of six who finds out what he can make by putting five and five cents together, is really a discoverer, even though everybody else in the world knows it. There is a genuine increment of experience; not another item mechanically added on, but enrichment of a new quality...The joy which children themselves experience is the joy of intellectual constructiveness..." (*D&E*, 159). This quote emphasizes the idea that when learning is play, when the child's surrounding environment is dynamic, a child identifies themselves as a discoverer of knowledge, and they are encouraged to take an active role in their own continued discovery.

Providing appropriate levels of work is crucial for creating an environment in which students will be engaged in dynamic discovery. If work is too hard, students will become discouraged and will abandon the task at hand or act out to avoid it. If work is too easy, the

students will become bored and will wander away. "...it is more important to keep alive a creative and constructive attitude than to secure an external perfection by engaging the pupil's action in too minute and too closely regulated pieces of work" (D&E, 197). Therefore, providing students with active tasks that directly engage their interests at a developmentally appropriate level is one of the best ways for a teacher to support children of all ability levels to become self-confident active participants in their own learning.

Rousseau believes that because self-sufficient individuals avoid *amour propre*, they can become contributing members of society who engage other individuals as equals. In order to apply his philosophy to children with special needs, we must reconsider what self-sufficient means in this context. Many individuals with disabilities are never able to live alone without help from another individual. This does not mean, however, that they do not have a level of independence or self-sufficiency – independence, for an individual with special needs, merely does not always mean standing alone, in the way that Rousseau meant at the time of his writing. Therefore, in order to apply his philosophy to children with special needs, we must consider "self-sufficiency" to mean "to the maximum extent possible". If we consider self-sufficiency to be a relative concept, then we are able to apply Rousseau's ideas. Rousseau writes, "...what makes man essentially good is to have few needs and to compare himself little to others; what makes him essentially wicked is to have many needs and to depend very much on opinion" (Rousseau 214). It is entirely possible for a child with special needs to avoid comparisons to others and jealousy and to be content in themselves – not needing the approval of others. A child with special needs who is becoming a self-directed and confident learner may

need more support than that of a typically developing child, but that support does not counteract their ability to achieve self-sufficiency.

When considering whether Rousseau and Dewey would agree with the EEU's goal to develop relationships that encourage all students to love and feel loved, one must look at how the philosophers view the importance of loving relationships. Rousseau believes that love is important and necessary; but he prioritizes the development of self-love before one can love others, as he worries that peer relationships could exert a negative influence if introduced before the individual is secure in themselves. He does, however, connect love to happiness, and acknowledges that there is an appropriate time for students to engage in loving relationships, writing, "I do not conceive how someone who needs nothing can love anything. I do not conceive how someone who loves nothing can be happy" (*Emile*, 221). Once the individual child has developed self-love, they are ready to love others without fear of developing *amour-propre*. Rousseau, therefore, is less concerned with developing relationships that make the student feel loved and more concerned with the student first developing love for themselves.

Dewey, of course, advocates for the power of relational change and the importance of teaching students how to engage in relationships with others. It is through these relationships, he writes, that greater unity between individuals can be achieved. Dewey states, "The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs creates for a new and broader environment. Common subject matter accustoms all to a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon than is visible to the members of any group while it is isolated" (*D&E*, 21). When schools introduce students and teachers to diverse perspectives, they provide opportunities for them to broaden their understanding of humanity. Through broad exposure

to a variety of people, cultures, and races, students and teachers are able to grow by developing empathy for others.

In terms of the EEU's goal, therefore, the difference between Rousseau and Dewey does not concern their opinion of the goal itself. Rather, they differ in their opinion of the role of the teacher to develop self-love and foster loving communities. Dewey argues that it is the role of the teacher to assist all students to develop loving relationships within their classroom community. Dewey writes, "...the only way in which adults consciously control the kind of education which the immature get is by controlling the environment in which they act, and hence think and feel" (*D&E*, 19). As children learn and develop meaning through their social interactions with one another, they are affected by those who surround them. Adults, in Dewey's philosophy, must develop classrooms in which peer interactions are strongly encouraged and are helped along by the teacher.

Where Dewey prioritizes the development of a loving community through relationships between many peers, created and maintained by a teacher, Rousseau believes in the power of a social environment built around only two relationships: that between Emile and himself, (i.e., between a student and his tutor). Like Dewey's environment, Emile's environment will be structured by a teacher. However, the development of a loving community will be on a smaller scale. Rousseau writes, "..., I do not want my pupil to be the only one to have fun. I want to make it even more agreeable for him by constantly sharing it with him" (*Emile*, 144). I have built many relationships simply by chasing children on the play court, showing them that I am interested in playing games with them. One-on-one time with teachers can help students feel supported, and teachers should do everything they can to stay engaged with their students, to

get to know them as individuals. Emile and Rousseau spend nearly exclusively one-on-one time together through the years, and this allows Emile to have a clear and consistent adult model. Having this consistency and this strong relationship means that the student-teacher attachment is extremely secure, leaving no room for Emile to develop insecurities around what his teacher may think of him – he knows he is loved. Therefore, for Rousseau, fostering a loving community requires the development of the relationship between Emile and his tutor, so that Emile can be truly focused on loving himself.

## **Conclusion**

Through this analysis of the philosophies of Rousseau and Dewey, I have come to two main conclusions. First, self-confidence is an important trait for a child with special needs to develop as they grow into an adolescent who will one day become a fully participating citizen. This self-confidence can largely be gained through play that is structured by adults. Second children with special needs require social interaction, guided by adults, with typically developed students. Interaction with typically-developing students is necessary for special needs children to learn norms that will help them integrate into society. Importantly, such interactions are equally necessary and valuable for children who are typically developed. When teachers guide typically developing students to interact with special needs students, they help them learn to respect special needs children as unique individuals. Inclusive education makes it possible to achieve both these goals. I reject Rousseau's notion that a child must develop self-confidence before they can join society as a fully participating member; I do not believe this can work for a student with special needs. More specifically, while I agree with Rousseau that a child with

special needs can develop confidence and self-assurance through exploring and playing with the guidance of a teacher, I do not believe this is enough. A child with special needs **must be** introduced to the play of others, must see how other children their age react to others and how they respond to new concepts as well as to the world around them. When children with special needs experience success in their interactions with typically developing students, they can see how their perspective, although different, is valuable. Inclusive education classrooms are places where successful interactions are most likely to occur, as inclusive classrooms have adults to guide students of all abilities through these new experiences.

In a world that often reminds students with special needs of what they lack, developing self-confidence, or a belief in one's own strengths and abilities, is crucial. Rousseau's concern about the development of *amour propre* is extremely relevant, especially for those considered to be "other" by society. It is important to consider the idea of intersectionality when thinking about the impact of *amour propre* for a student with special needs. Intersectionality can be defined as the concept that a person's identities compound and overlap in ways that can amplify discrimination. If a student with special needs is also LGBTQ+ identifying, a minority, a woman, or identifies with any other population that has been historically marginalized, they will face significant bias and violence from society. Educators must be aware of this effect on students and assist them in developing a strong sense of self, starting from early childhood. Rousseau's idea that a student can learn the extent of their capabilities through play and exploration, with the guidance of a loving adult, is essential when considering how to assist children to combat any form of discrimination.

However, while keeping children away from any form of discrimination is tempting, it is both unrealistic and not in the best interest of the student. If we are to follow Rousseau's advice and remove the student with special needs from society when they are young, we will not be giving them all the tools necessary to combat discrimination. While isolated children may not experience discrimination, they also won't know what to do when they return to society as adolescents and encounter people who discriminate against them. Additionally, removing special needs children from society and educating them separately from typically developing children hurts *all* children. Bias and stereotypes are best combatted by relationships, by love. An individual's lived experiences with others serve as active counter-examples to hateful narratives. This is where Dewey's idea that understanding requires interacting with diverse perspectives becomes central and necessary.

The best option for helping children learn to interact with others whose perspectives differ from theirs is inclusive education. In inclusive settings, teachers can arrange a dynamic environment in which students experience a wide range of relationships. These relationships will provide a foundation for the rest of the children's lives. Students with special needs can become self-confident in their own abilities. If they wish to run and play on their own, like Emile, then their teachers can provide cognitively appropriate depth to that play. If they wish to play with peers, then, again, they are in an environment where teachers are equipped to support those interactions. Rather than shy away from a peer with special needs, typically developing students can be guided to learn how play can look different from person to person; the typically developing student can see the strengths of their new friend, and the student with special needs can broaden their experience of play through inclusive social interactions.

All students deserve love and an equal role in their community. This point is advocated by both Rousseau and Dewey, although they advocate different pedagogical methods to nurture love and equality. Drawing on the prioritization of self-confidence by Rousseau and the breadth of social relationships favored by Dewey, educators can create classroom settings that break down discrimination starting at a very young age. The development of a community that prioritizes feeling loved and equal is a challenging proposition, but it is necessary. The best path to achieve this goal is inclusive education.

Of course, inclusive education does not answer all questions or solve all problems. For children of all abilities, play must hold meaning. Rousseau and Dewey agree that teachers must modify the play of children in order to make their play meaningful and thus educationally significant. They also agree that play should follow the interests of the child.

However, while this logic makes sense for typically-developing children, it may not apply to special needs children. The question is this: If play must be meaningful in order to be educative, how can play be modified for children who have difficulty comprehending meaning? To appreciate why this question is so challenging, it is helpful to think about a child with special needs who is being taught to wave. Other than being rewarded for imitation, (such as receiving a cookie for waving) the child attributes no meaning to this action and thus has little motivation to learn it. Following Rousseau, learning on one's own is difficult if not impossible for children who are unable to comprehend meaning in the same way that typically developed children can. For such children, play may be neither motivating nor educative. Dewey's philosophy does not help us, either, if the child's disability prevents them from understanding meaning through social interactions. I do not have a ready answer for my question, and I am hopeful that

Rousseau and Dewey have helped to provide deeper insight as to why this question is so puzzling. It is an important consideration, I believe, for future educational philosophers, as well as for educators interested in implementing inclusive school programs, and warrants significant further research.