

Research Abstract

Education remains a topic of hot debate as legislators, teachers, and parents argue over the best teaching techniques, how large class sizes should be, and accountability of teachers, amongst other subtopics. The education debate can get even more heated regarding how to best educate autistic children, such as whether mainstreaming or separate classrooms are appropriate. Furthermore, even when empirically validated practices are available for use they are not always implemented in schools. However, democratic schooling has largely been left out of the debate, especially for autistic students.

The purpose of this pilot study is to explore whether democratic schooling is a viable alternative to public schools for autistic students based on factors of academic learning, well-being, and overall happiness. Interviews were conducted with an educator of autistic students, a democratic school staff member, an education researcher specializing in autism, and two autistic graduate students who are studying education. They were asked regarding their thoughts on how autistic students fare in public schools; programs that should be place for autistic students and their families; and their perspectives on democratic schooling as an alternative educational path for autistic students. Discussions ensued regarding intrinsic motivation; the legal system surrounding special education; the high incidences of autistic students as victims of bullying; parental knowledge of the opportunities afforded to their children by law; and guided exposure to knowledge versus unfettered exposure to knowledge. Democratic schooling is defined as education that hold self-governance in the highest esteem, namely those schools which allow children to choose their own topics and methods of study.