

Article

## Inclusive Education Triumphs: The Story of Emily's Journey through Kathleen McDonnell's *Emily Included*

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**Abstract:** Kathleen McDonnell's *Emily Included* (2011) narrates Emily Eaton's struggle with severe cerebral palsy. The paper, through this narrative, investigates the numerous limitations and discriminations faced by individuals with disabilities in their daily lives. The study analyses non-discriminatory and inclusive educational rights and the impact of legal frameworks on the educational rights of pupils with disabilities. The research examines the societal impacts of inclusion initiatives, especially in the realm of education. McDonnell's depiction of Emily's pursuit of inclusive education is as impactful as the narratives of several individuals with disabilities who have encountered similar isolation. Her narrative underscores the necessity of inclusive education and advocates for governmental reforms to enhance equitable access to education. Emily's authentic experience exemplifies the emphasis of disability studies on equality, accessibility, and equity. *Emily Included* (2011) assists children, such as Emily, in managing several barriers, thereby enabling them to access and pursue inclusive education.

**Keywords:** Children with Disabilities; Inclusive Education; Social Inclusion; Equality; Accessibility; Empowerment

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## Introduction

Kathleen McDonnell's novel *Emily Included* (2011) depicts the protagonist Emily Eaton and her family's journey towards securing her right to education with her non-disabled peers in a regular classroom set up. The novel is set against the backdrop of a society that is deeply rooted in the practice of segregating children with disabilities. The Eaton family's fight, which is characterised by tenacity and resolve, reaches unprecedented heights as it culminates in a historic court battle that reaches the highest levels of Canada's judicial system. A thought-provoking investigation of the social and legal aspects of inclusive education, *Emily Included* (2011) is a work that has tried to make the readers think about the existing educational system that sometimes denies equal accessibility. The parents of Emily became embroiled in a protracted legal battle to ensure that their daughter was enrolled in regular school. This is consistent with the principles that are outlined in the Inclusive Education Theory, which advocates for an educational structure that can accommodate a broad variety of teaching and learning needs. The difficulties that people with disabilities face in their pursuit of inclusive education are brilliantly shown through Emily's journey, which serves as a perfect illustration of these difficulties.

In the story, the characters' relationships with educational institutions and social structures are investigated, and the reader is given an understanding of the challenges and achievements that are associated with these spheres, respectively. *Emily Included* (2011) explores the idea of inclusive education, and the portrayals contribute to a more critical understanding of the connection that exists between the education system and people with disability. Emily, a character with cerebral palsy, is given the authority to convey her own experiences in the narrative. Throughout the text, Emily's voice is reflected by challenging the standards and biases that society has incorporated around those who have disabilities like cerebral palsy. Emily is given agency by emphasizing her ability, as seen in her facial expressions and sign language. By providing Emily with the chance to articulate her views and opinions, the story has been transformed into a powerful tool for promoting the idea that people with disabilities can have their unique voices, points of view, and the strength to take action and challenge the existing societal norms.

## Objective of the Research:

This research aims to question how people with disabilities are experiencing barriers to the rights of non-discriminatory and inclusive education. The research work aims to show how legal frameworks may or may not always effectively address the educational rights of people with disabilities. The work has tried to uncover some broader societal implications associated with initiatives for the implementation of inclusion in education sectors. The research work aims to show the significance of inclusive education, demanding policy reformation that ensures equality and accessibility, as well as to instigate individuals towards community-centered inclusion. It seeks to emphasise the importance of inclusion for everyone and highlights the indomitable nature of willpower through the story of *Emily Included* (2011) by Kathleen McDonnell.

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**Methodology:**

The research work has used a qualitative research design by concentrating on library-based research and analysing literary text. To support and contextualise the study, secondary materials have been collected from academic databases and libraries, including books, scholarly papers, and literary criticisms. Interpretive analysis is used in the research work to look at how the text represents larger historical, social, or cultural settings. The technique follows the academic norms of critical inquiry by emphasising the amalgamation of primary and secondary materials to produce a balanced argument.

**Independent Living Philosophy and Its Importance:**

The Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States marked the emergence of the Independent Living Movement towards success. People with disabilities have already started to fight for their rights through questioning social conventions, and they demanded autonomy and self-determination during that time. The start of the Centre for Independent Living (CIL) in Berkeley, California, in 1972 by the advocates for people with disabilities, like Ed Roberts, was one of the significant events. The philosophy of Independent Living depends on a rights-based approach that supports the idea of agency, autonomy, and, most importantly, the dignity of people with disabilities. It stands for the removal of all obstacles, such as physical, social, and mental, that prevent individuals with disabilities from fully participating in mainstream society and from being included in the community. Independent Living as a philosophical concept emphasises the autonomy of people with disabilities to make decisions about their own lives. This may include choices of housing, employment, schooling, health care services, and other aspects of daily life. The development of self-determination creates a sense of agency and ownership by enabling human beings to take charge of their own lives. The Independent Living Philosophy treated people with disabilities as independent, equal, and provided them with several opportunities and accessibility that they required. The core of the Independent Living Philosophy was inclusion, which advocated for the full inclusion and engagement of individuals with disabilities in all sectors of society. This included having access to education, social activities, leisure, housing, workplaces, and transportation. Inclusion is genuine interaction and a sense of belonging within various communities, going beyond simple physical access. Including both structural and psychological barriers, accessibility was another important part of the Independent Living Philosophy. Therefore, removing architectural obstacles and installing facilities like ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, accessible classrooms, and teaching assistants were necessary for this inclusion.

**Inclusive Education System and Its Importance:**

Inclusive education is an educational approach that focuses on ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, economic, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. Individuals with disabilities were denied access to school prior to the middle of the 20th century. They were

provided with segregated facilities in separate institutions and were excluded from regular learning opportunities. The concept of special schools emerged in the early 1900s as a means of meeting the educational needs of children with disabilities. The landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* held that racial discrimination in any educational institution was illegal. Disability Rights Movement was inspired and given a boost by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which addressed the matter of systemic discrimination through institutionalization and societal injustice towards people with disabilities. One of the first laws to prohibit discrimination based on disability in activities and programs that receive government funding is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973). This included all stages of the educational sector, from basic and secondary schools to postsecondary establishments, including colleges and universities. The year 1975 saw the implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), also known as Public Law 94-142, mandated that all kids with disabilities would receive free and appropriate education in a public environment. To meet the unique needs of kids with disabilities, special education and related services have to be made available.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was first drafted in 2006. It was signed on March 30, 2007, in New York, and it became effective in 2008. The CRPD has 50 articles that delineate precise rights and responsibilities about many components of the life of individuals with disabilities. These include access to medical care, proper education, employment, involvement in political and societal affairs, access to legal resources, and more privileges. The CRPD assured that people with disabilities are subjected to equal socio-political rights and freedom like other people and requires governments to take necessary measures to ensure full participation of people with disabilities in society. Under CRPD, the Right to Education was one of the most important social rights for those with disabilities. It mentioned the necessity of governments to guarantee that individuals with disabilities are provided with inclusive and excellent learning opportunities, and that appropriate modifications need to be implemented to allow them to take part in educational activities with their non-disabled friends. Governments must provide equal opportunities for education to individuals with disabilities across all educational levels and formats, including preschool, primary, secondary, post-secondary, vocational, and lifelong learning. To help people with disabilities access educational opportunities, this involves offering educational and personal assistance, assistive technologies, accessible physical and digital infrastructures, and transportation. For people who have disabilities, the freedom from discrimination in the educational system is equally acknowledged as a right. Governments need to make sure that there is no discrimination against individuals with disabilities in any aspect of education, including admission, registration, successful completion, and full involvement.

The inclusive education system has provided numerous advantages that are beneficial not only for children with disabilities but also for society as a whole. It gives a chance to the kids with disabilities to opt for an education system of the same calibre as their abled-bodied classmates, by keeping in mind their social and intellectual

growth. The system of inclusive education fosters the development of empathy, respect, and an awareness regarding diversity in kids from a very early age, which is important in an increasingly globalised society. The students may develop better academic results via an inclusive education system. According to research, an inclusive classroom setup often provides better outcomes for students because of their exposure to different points of view, and collaborative learning approaches. Educators in inclusive environments are also encouraged to use new and different teaching techniques that accommodate different learning preferences, which may appear to be advantageous for every student.

However, many schools, especially in nations that have low economic growth, lack the resources to accommodate kids with a variety of requirements, which may include the infrastructure, qualified and trained staff, or various educational materials. The quality of education may decrease because of overcrowded classrooms and overworked instructors, resulting from insufficient resources. Attitudinal barriers are additional problems, such as misconceptions and conventional ideologies within society about disability, that may hamper the fruitful prosecution of an inclusive education system. Biases within educators, parents, and even students may influence how they behave with one another, which may further make the classroom unwelcoming for children with disabilities. Legislative and policy frameworks play an essential role in determining how well the inclusive education system operates. Policies may not have enough enforcement mechanisms or be executed improperly in many places, leaving gaps between the intended and actual practices of the policies. Therefore, a diversified strategy is necessary to overcome these obstacles and realise the actual strength of the inclusive education system.

### ***Emily Included: Emily's Fight for Inclusive Educational Rights***

*Emily Included* (2011) by Kathleen McDonnell is based on the case of Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education (1997) and the true-life story of Emily Eaton, whose name is inspiring in the milestones of Canada's Disability Rights Movement. The book has been written with the help of the real characters, including Emily, who herself has contributed a message in the book. In Chapter I, named "Regular School," it is mentioned that as a baby, Emily used to go to "Granville Children's Centre, where all the kids had disabilities". She used to go there mainly for "physiotherapy, speech therapy, playtime, and special celebrations like Halloween" (5). When Emily's parents meet the Principal of a regular school named "Maple Avenue School", they mention, "Cerebral Palsy causes different problems in different people. In Emily's case, her body is 'floppy', so she does not have much control over her movements. Moreover, she cannot see very well, because her eyes do not focus together" (7). Though the doctors declare that she will be like "vegetable", her parents are determined not to limit her future possibilities. Emily's father Clayton possesses very progressive thoughts; inspired by independent living philosophy, he says, "she will learn more with classmates who are not disabled. For example, she is been trying to learn sign language. She will be encouraged to use it more if she is surrounded by kids her age who can speak" (9). While talking about her rights of equality, her father mentions she deserves every



chance of learning like any other kid. He not only talks about his daughter's progress, but he also talks about creating a society where kids with disabilities and non-disabled kids would be able to learn from each other and would create a society free from biased conventional modes of understanding disability. As he says, "putting Emily in a regular class would also be good for the other children, because they would learn about people with disabilities... The children she grows up with will be part of her community when she is an adult. They need to get to know her, and she needs to get to know them" (10).

Maple Avenue School was not a disability-friendly school; therefore, the Principal requested time to make the necessary arrangements in the school. Emily loves to play soccer with her brother, "with the help of the walker, seemed to give her more control over her legs" (16). Her mother introduces her to American Sign Language from the very beginning so that she would use sign language while communicating with her friends in school. During their lunch, her mother keeps asking her to recall signs for short terms like 'please', 'drink', 'more', etc. While teaching the sign of 'more', her mother Carol "held up both hands with her palms facing inward and brought the tips of her fingers together. Then she guided Emily's hands in the same motion" (18). Emily finds it hard to sign the term "please", her father and mother keep on encouraging her, and she keeps on practicing it (19). When she joins Maple Avenue School, it becomes difficult for her, as the other kids appear to be "strangers" to her and vice versa. She gets an educational assistant, "a full-time helper like Maria to push her wheelchair, take her to the bathroom, and help her with activities like this" (23). In this kindergarten, she starts to walk gradually without the help of a walker. Soon, the other kids at the school get too familiar with her use of American Sign Language, and they even start to help her while walking. She starts to love finger painting and brush painting, even if she faces problems while holding the brush. Emily faces difficulties while doing some activities. Here, Maria comes up with a "hand over hand" strategy, which means, "Emily did not just watch what the rest of the class was doing - she did the activity right along with them and felt involved in what was going on. She was just as proud of the things she made with Maria as of the work she did on her own" (24).

There was a "Communication Book" to keep a record of the communication between Maria and Emily's parents, which helped them to know what was going on in the school daily. Once Maria mentions in the book the question asked by other kids regarding Emily's vision, Carol answers in detail how it is difficult for Emily to make eye contact because of her medical condition. However, she further mentions that in the future, it may be possible that through using any communication device, Emily will be able to communicate appropriately. She appreciates "her classmates' efforts at learning to sign with her" (26). At the birthday party, Emily's father, Clayton, observes that other kids are learning and using sign language to talk to Emily, which surprises him. After this party, Emily feels that her school friends have transformed into her real friends. After completing grade one at the school, the authority informs that Emily needs to shift to a special school for children with disabilities. Being upset with the situation, Emily's parents seek the help of the Advocacy Resource Centre for the Handicapped, which is "interested in starting a test case based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Since the Charter guaranteed equality for people with

disabilities, ARCH wanted to argue that the school board was legally required to include Emily in a regular classroom just like other kids, and to provide the support she needed” (45).

By the time Emily starts her grade two class at Maple Avenue. In the group activity of the class, she participates enthusiastically with her friends Carry and Tommy and does the required research. The school appoints a new assistant named Cheryl, and the school board officials repeatedly conduct tests for Emily, which makes her frustrated. Emily strongly feels the words of Bobby Curtola’s song that express her frustration:

*I just can’t seem to concentrate.  
I can’t buckle down  
I never get my schoolwork done  
My head’s always turning around  
I catch the teacher’s angry looks  
When my head’s not buried in my books.  
She knows my thoughts are all around  
That girl is three rows over and two seats down (56).*

Emily watches the sand hill cranes soaring high in the sky and feels “a powerful longing to burst out of her wheelchair and fly alongside them” (59). She, with her father, takes part in the Spring into Action race competition, “she remembered the sand hill cranes,” and she becomes the winner of the competition (60). During the Special Education Tribunal hearing, Emily’s parents, brothers, and even the parents of some of her friends gave statements in which they mentioned that they want their children to be in the same class as Emily. Because they want them to learn about and grow with each other (65). The school board argues that Emily would not be tested based on what she learned in class, and therefore, she cannot be part of the school anymore. The school board’s lawyer tries to focus on the difficulties of allowing a student like Emily in a regular classroom. However, Emily’s lawyer, Anne, focuses on the benefits of allowing Emily in regular class (67). The director of a disability agency with the United States government, Bob Williams from Washington, D.C., arrives as one of the witnesses who makes a positive impact in Emily’s life. She finds out that Bob Williams also has a similar case history of cerebral palsy to hers. However, the fascinating part about him is his way of communicating through a computer-like screen attached to the arm of his wheelchair, which has a keyboard too. This machine generates sound as soon as it types words. Emily comes to know that at his early life Bob was ill treated by the society, once he started to communicate with the help of machine, he “noticed that people treated him differently, and took him more seriously...People think that because a person cannot speak, they don’t have anything to say” (70). However, at the end of the hearing, “The Tribunal agreed with the school board. They said that Emily should be moved to a special class for disabled students” (72).

Emily’s parents decide to go to the Divisional Court. Maple Avenue school allows Emily to join the grade three class with a full-time educational assistant until the decision of the Divisional Court is made. Emily becomes worried about the pending

decision, as she does not feel comfortable working with the new educational assistant, Laurel, initially. Emily “needed someone who would get to know her as a person and help her learn as much as she could” (82). Emily loves all sorts of activities, which are introduced to her. Slowly, her friends in the class start to understand her in a better way, and they “started to come up with all kinds of ideas” (84). She is included in the drama exercises and gym classes too. Eaton’s learned that the Divisional Court of Ontario has supported the decision of the Tribunal. Activists around the city believed that it would be a form of discrimination and violation of rights if Emily were not allowed to join the regular school. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms stated, “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability” (86). Therefore, different organisations and disability rights groups decide to be “interveners” in the case. On the other hand, Maple Avenue no longer assists Emily, so it becomes evident that Emily must change schools.

Emily shifts to Blessed Sacrament School, which “had a policy of including students with disabilities in regular classrooms” (88); in the new school, everyone welcomes her. In one of the assignments of giving a speech in class, students come up with an idea that they will use a special kind of tape player, and Emily’s subject of speech will be “How I do things differently from most people” (95). With the help of her father, Emily’s speech is recorded. When it is finally played in front of class, everyone appreciates her and for the first time Emily “found her voice” (96). On the other hand, the ongoing case “was about the principles of equality and justice for all people with disabilities,” and Emily’s parent are determined to see the end. Finally, the verdict comes, and the Eaton family wins the case as the Court of Appeal declares that “denying Emily the opportunity to be educated in a regular class did indeed violate her equality rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms” (99). The decision written by Madame Justice Louise Arbour mentions,

From the earliest age, disabled children should see themselves as part of the mainstream of society, and children who are not disabled should see them the same way. Inclusion into the main school population is a benefit to Emily because, without it, she would have few opportunities to learn how other children work and how they live. Moreover, they will not learn that she can live with them, and they with her. (100)

The matter finally goes to the Supreme Court of Canada when Emily is twelve years old. They reach the courtroom, but they clearly understand at the entrance “The Supreme Court was not a welcoming place for visitors in wheelchairs” as the infrastructure is not disability-friendly. This time, a lawyer named Stephen Goudge took over Emily’s case. The hearing is witnessed by many people with disabilities, including “many in wheelchairs, some who had the distinctive features of Down Syndrome, others with guide dogs in harnesses” (106). This case is not only important for Emily but for every child with disabilities. It was hard to guess what the decision could be, but the crowd inside and the outside of the courtroom that day proved that “society’s view of people with disabilities was undergoing a huge change” (108). The



Decision of the Supreme Court of Canada was made by Justice John Sopinka, who said every school and institution should do everything possible to include children with disabilities. It is a victory for not only Emily but for each child with disabilities all over the country (109). By this time, Emily finishes her high school studies, and she starts to live fully with the help of an assistant paid by the government. She gets involved in “fitness classes, yoga, art galleries, and the local library” (112). In 2006, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It called on society to view them not as objects of pity, but as active members of society who are entitled to the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. In particular, the UN Convention strongly supported including children with disabilities in regular classrooms” (113).

In the book *Emily Included* (2011), Emily mentions in her message, “I am happy that children will read my story. I am very proud that going to the Supreme Court has helped other kids with disabilities to be included in their classrooms” (120). McDonnell criticises the ideology of the so-called normal society, which thinks that communication is possible only using written and spoken words. However, it is possible that facial expression and body gestures can also be a medium of communication. As she mentions in the Author’s Note, “Often these are spontaneous, natural gestures - nodding the head for ‘yes,’ shaking it to indicate ‘no,’ rolling our eyes to show we are bored by someone or something. Signing, used by the deaf and hearing-impaired, is a form of language that substitutes actions, particularly hand signals, for spoken words” (122).

*Emily Included* (2011) by Kathleen McDonnell has offered an insightful exploration of the independent living philosophy, shedding light on the unavoidable interaction between objective conditions and subjectivity, specifically through the real story of Emily Eaton. Postcolonial intellectuals, such as Edward Said, proposed that people who are part of marginalised groups can actively question the narratives that have been forced upon them. The narrative can be seen as a medium to question typical and traditional ideologies on disability by establishing a narrative environment specifically for this objective (Sawant). Emily’s narrative shows her resistance and interrogation of prevailing societal norms and expectations, emphasising her autonomy in building and shaping her own identity and subjectivity. The confrontation between Emily’s parents and the school officials reflects postcolonial ideals as it represents defiance against the enforcement of prevailing perspectives that often devalue people with disabilities. The story can be analysed through postmodern approaches to deconstruct dichotomies, while also challenging traditional notions of ability and disability. Postmodern theorists, such as Jacques Derrida, support the deconstruction of dichotomies to reveal the dynamic and interconnected nature of ideas. *Emily Included* (2011) presents a realistic description that transcends traditional categorisations, exploring the relationship between ability and disability.

The court battle that Emily’s parents started, as portrayed in *Emily Included* (2011), is a prime example of how political and legal factors combine to support discriminatory educational practices. This is in line with political theory, which emphasises how policies affect the social system structurally. The most important court

dispute, for instance, demonstrates the fundamental power dynamics inside political institutions, impacting people's capacity towards taking action and the novel's understanding of the larger social effects of educational initiatives. *Emily Included* (2011) serves as a criticism of the ableist practices that are prominent in the field of education. Examining the discriminatory behaviours that prevent students with disabilities from being integrated may be accomplished critically using the lens of disability studies. The decision made by Emily's parents to appeal the school's decision and take the matter to the Ontario Supreme Court is a dramatic action that exposes discriminatory practices and highlights the negative impact they have on the lives of those with disabilities. Emily saw her court victory as a personal accomplishment as well as a driving force for revolutionary social changes. A detailed account of the systemic barriers that legal activism challenges and removes is illustrated with specific examples, including Emily's real experiences in a regular classroom and the tension in the courtroom trial. The story of Emily serves as an example of how legislative frameworks, as recommended by inclusive education theory, may improve the educational environment and foster more inclusivity for children with disabilities.

### Conclusion:

*Emily Included* (2011) has provided a comprehensive analysis of the challenges present within the educational system, with a special emphasis on institutional barriers. The examination of the text adheres to the ideas of Comparative Education Theory. The legal conflicts surrounding Emily serve as a prime example of how institutional structures may provide significant barriers to attaining inclusive education. Emily's encounters in a conventional kindergarten facility, her grievances over the discriminatory behaviour of society, and her ultimate triumph in court demonstrate how institutional standards can both restrict and transform people. Comparative Education Theory analyses the challenges and highlights the potential of legislative measures to change educational settings and foster inclusivity.

In the novel *Emily Included* (2011), Emily's successful resolution of the court case on inclusive education aligns with the goal of Disability Studies to address and overcome institutional barriers (McDonnell, 2011). The narrative functions as a vehicle to not only portray disability but also to empower individuals to shape their destinies actively. The situation where Emily's parents persistently campaign for inclusive education despite the school authorities highlights the significant impact of Disability Studies discourse. This piece of literature not only narrates the experiences of those with disabilities but also actively engages in transforming society's perception, fostering empowerment, and contributing to conversations that reshape our notions of capability, disability, and inclusivity. The narrative relates to broader conversations including epistemology, power, and social metamorphosis. It advocates for a moral stance against exclusion and urges the creation of an ethical society that embraces diversity.

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