

## Hellen Keller Voicing the Disabled

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### Abstract

A summary of Helen Keller's contributions to education is given in this chapter, along with a discussion of her main sources of inspiration, driving forces, significant accomplishments, insights, and legacies. Keller's mentor and instructor, Anne Sullivan, left a lasting impression on her teaching philosophy. Sullivan was referred to as *the teacher* long after her passing. Throughout her career, despite her dysgraphia and mute state she was consistent to be educated by learning, writing, and speaking. The two things that Keller focused upon are –

- i. exploring historical works in the context of political and social battles and,
- ii. the concept of learning as evaluated and discussed in *The World I Live In*, outstand as her most innovative and enduring contributions to educational theory and practice.

As a political theorist, Keller made important advances to socialist doctrine and methodology. Keller mostly adopted a Marxist perspective on the emancipation and oppression of people with disabilities in her contributions to education. Keller uses perseverance and hard work to overcome obstacles and teach a moral message. Most of her publications were directed towards disabled people, whom she contends via personal initiative, overcome their limitations, societal injustices, and oppression as minorities. Keller continued to be a prolific educator while not pursuing a career in teaching because she understood the role that education plays in social and political engagement. She thought that education was the key to solving many social and political issues. Keller dedicated her life to enlightening others about the social and political

issues that were most important to her. She had extensive socialist involvement, which had an impact on everyone. Given Keller's multifaceted contributions, this chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive exploration of her life, drawing upon biographical accounts, her written works, and her impactful engagement in social and political activism. It explores these dimensions pertaining to Keller as a novice for the disabled.

**Keywords:** education, disabilities, philosophy, civil rights

## 1. Who was Ms. Keller?

Helen Keller stands as an iconic figure in American history, renowned for her remarkable achievements despite facing profound challenges due to her deafness and blindness. She emerged as a prominent advocate for individuals with physical impairments and an ambassador for the United States. Adding more to her educational pursuits, she has left an indelible mark on the political landscape, espousing socialist ideals, and vehemently critiquing imperialistic foreign policies of the United States. Central to her advocacy was the call for global leaders to address issues such as poverty and warfare, advocating for a world free from such afflictions (Chamberlin, 1899)<sup>1</sup>. In a reflective account from 2002, Keller acknowledged how her early experiences of isolation spurred her into political activism, shaping her into an impassioned communicator (Keller, 2002)<sup>2</sup>. Through extensive engagement with societal issues, Keller's activism traversed various spheres (Nielsen, 2001)<sup>3</sup>.

While Keller's direct involvement in formal education was limited, her influence on educational discourse was profound. Despite not assuming the role of a traditional educator, Keller's prolific writings and numerous lectures are advocating for the rights of the deaf and blind, which underscores her commitment to education in its broadest sense (Love, 1934)<sup>4</sup>. Within the realm of political thought, Keller's contributions to socialist theory were significant, offering insights into the intersectionality of disability liberation and oppression, largely influenced by Marxist perspectives. Keller's life story serves as a moral testament to overcoming adversity through perseverance and hard work. Her writings aimed at individuals with disabilities emphasized the potential for personal empowerment, challenging social inequities, and oppression through individual agency. Although her professional career did not revolve around education, Keller remained an influential educator, recognising the pivotal role of education in fostering societal and political change. She steadfastly believed that education held the key to addressing the myriad social and political challenges confronting humanity. In

essence, Keller dedicated her life to educating others about the causes she held dear, leaving an enduring legacy in both educational and activist circles (Montgomery, 2010)<sup>5</sup>.

Helen Keller was born into a prominent family in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on June 27, 1880, with a lineage that had owned enslaved individuals prior to the Civil War. Despite the family's diminished fortunes compared to the antebellum era, they retained sufficient means to provide for Keller and her four siblings, ensuring they lacked for no necessities. At the tender age of 19 months, Keller fell ill with a condition that baffled doctors, leading to a loss of both her sight and hearing, severely curtailing her social and educational interactions (Foulkes & Pines, 2018)<sup>6</sup>. Despite the unwavering support of her family, Keller grappled with profound isolation, unable to fully immerse herself in the world around her. It was at the age of six that a turning point came when her family sought the assistance of Alexander Graham Bell, who recommended Anne Sullivan, a graduate of the Perkins Institute for the Blind, to become Keller's governess (Rosenbaum & Gianvito, 2020)<sup>7</sup>. This marked the beginning of a lifelong companionship and collaboration between Keller and Sullivan, with the latter employing innovative methods to teach Keller language and communication skills. Under Sullivan's guidance, Keller made significant strides, eventually gaining admission to Radcliffe University at the age of twenty. The historic milestone came in her life four years later, when she became the first graduate from a university under the especially abled category. On June 1, 1968, Keller's remarkable journey culminated when she passed away due to complications from a stroke. (Love, 1934; Keller, 2020).

## **2. What influenced Keller and her life?**

Throughout her lifetime, Helen Keller was profoundly influenced by key individuals and ideologies that shaped her personal and professional trajectory. Foremost among these influences was Anne Sullivan, whose impact on Keller's life was monumental. Collaborating for fifty years, Keller credited much of her education and personal development to Sullivan's dedicated guidance, expressing profound admiration and dependency on her mentor (Foulkes & Pines, 2018). Their bond was so deep that Keller engaged in disputes over Sullivan's final resting place, underscoring the immense significance of their relationship (Nielsen, 2009: 139)<sup>8</sup>. Sullivan's innovative teaching methods, such as finger spelling, were instrumental in Keller's acquisition of language and education, paving the way for her ground-breaking achievements (Rosenbaum & Gianvito, 2020).

Alexander Graham Bell played a pivotal role in Keller's life, advocating for oralism and influencing her communication methods significantly. Keller's exposure to Bell's groundbreaking work in communication, particularly with the telephone, left a lasting impression on her approach to language and interaction (Keller, 1914, 2002). However, it was Sullivan's patient tutelage that enabled Keller to overcome the formidable barriers posed by her dual disabilities. Keller's personal life was also marked by her relationship with Peter Fagan, a journalist and fellow socialist. While details of their affair remain somewhat obscure, Fagan's socialist leanings profoundly influenced Keller's socio-political ideologies, shaping her activism and worldview. Despite societal barriers and familial disapproval, Keller cherished their connection, highlighting the intersection of disability, love, and societal attitudes (Bass, 2012)<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, Keller drew inspiration from political radicals such as Mark Twain and Charlie Chaplin, whose socialist ideologies resonated with her advocacy for marginalised communities (Chamberlin, 1899). Twain's introduction led to Keller's sponsorship for education, facilitating her rise as a renowned speaker and author. Keller's involvement with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) further exemplifies her early political radicalism and commitment to labour organizations (Keller, 2002). Keller's socialist convictions were deeply intertwined with her views on education, reflecting her belief that social and political change were contingent upon widespread education. Influenced by thinkers like Karl Marx and H.G. Wells, Keller saw education as a catalyst for revolutionizing society, advocating for universal access to learning (Love, 1934). However, her later years saw a shift in political engagement, influenced in part by her diplomatic responsibilities as an American ambassador (Nielsen, 2009).

Furthermore, Keller's religious and philosophical inclinations, particularly her affinity for Emanuel Swedenborg, underscored her critique of societal inequalities and capitalism. Her socialist perspective was informed by a rejection of traditional religious interpretations that perpetuated social hierarchies and economic disparities (Keller, 1914). Keller's experiences with disability and gender discrimination fuelled her activism for women's rights, challenging entrenched societal norms and advocating for progressive causes (Parra, 2022)<sup>10</sup>. Despite her remarkable achievements, Keller faced criticism and scepticism when venturing into political discourse, highlighting the pervasive ableism and sexism of her time. Her advocacy for social justice and equality, grounded in her own experiences of overcoming adversity, challenged societal perceptions, and advocated for the rights of marginalized communities (Keller, 1967)<sup>11</sup>. In essence, Helen Keller's life journey was shaped by a multitude of influences, from

her mentors and lovers to political ideologies and personal convictions. Her legacy as an advocate for social change and education continues to inspire generations, underscoring the enduring relevance of her work in challenging societal norms and advancing inclusivity and equality.

### **3. Keller's Educational Philosophy and its Philosophical Context**

Helen Keller's educational philosophy, articulated in 1913, reflects her deep-seated desire for a fairer, more just, and equitable world. Rejecting illusions in favour of reality, Keller emphasized the importance of inner purpose and faith in fostering genuine happiness (Nielsen, 2009; Keller, 2000). Despite valuing her formal education at Radcliffe, Keller believed that true learning transcended traditional academic settings, advocating for a holistic approach that integrates lived experiences with academic pursuits (Keller, 1967).

Keller's educational philosophy intersects with various schools of thought in education, each offering unique perspectives on teaching and learning. Perennialism, centred on the study of canonical works, diverges from Keller's socialist leanings but acknowledges her broad intellectual curiosity (Gilbert, 2018). Conversely, progressivism, emphasising student-centred learning and active experimentation, aligns closely with Keller's belief in holistic education and social activism (Brown, 2017)<sup>12</sup>.

Essentialism, focusing on a core body of knowledge transmitted systematically, contrasts with Keller's emphasis on experiential learning and the exploration of diverse perspectives (Ellis, 2014)<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, reconstructionism advocates for addressing social issues through education, a principle that resonates with Keller's commitment to social justice (Tröhler, 2017)<sup>14</sup>.

Eclecticism, which advocates for the integration of multiple educational philosophies, mirrors Keller's eclectic approach to learning, drawing from various sources such as reading, travel, and personal interaction (Siegel et al., 2008)<sup>15</sup>. Existentialism, emphasising individual agency and purpose, complements Keller's belief in the importance of creativity and experimentation in education (Koerrenz, 2017)<sup>16</sup>.

While Keller's philosophy aligns most closely with progressivism and critical theory, her eclectic approach underscores the complexity of educational ideologies and their applications (Koerrenz, 2017). By embracing diverse perspectives and advocating for experiential learning rooted in social consciousness, Keller's educational philosophy continues to inspire innovative approaches to teaching and learning in today's educational landscape.

#### 4. Keller as the Catalyst of Social Change

Helen Keller's insights into education extend beyond her personal experiences to encompass broader societal issues, particularly the intersection of disability, capitalism, and education. Keller astutely observed the perpetuation of economic inequality under capitalism, noting the disproportionate impact on individuals with disabilities who often find themselves marginalized and economically less privileged (Keller, 1973)<sup>17</sup>. However, her views on special education, advocating for separate institutions and lower standards, diverge from contemporary perspectives and even contradict her own life trajectory, raising questions about her beliefs regarding disability and opportunity (Keller, 1973).

Keller's advocacy for socialism emerges as a central theme in her contributions to education and social change. As a prominent figure in the socialist movement, Keller leveraged her platform to champion equality in education and society at large. Her writings on issues ranging from socialism, women, and disability underscores the interconnectedness of social justice issues and emphasised the need for systemic change to address inequality (Keller, 1973). Drawing from religious foundations, Keller framed her socialist beliefs as a moral imperative rooted in principles of social justice and equality, challenging prevailing capitalist structures, and advocating for a classless society (Keller, 1973).

Furthermore, Keller's emphasis on the role of emotions in education represents another significant aspect of her educational philosophy. Contrary to traditional views that emotions hinder learning, Keller recognized the value of emotional engagement in the educational process, drawing from her own sensory experiences to underscore the importance of empathy and emotional connection in understanding literature and human experiences (Nielsen, 2009).

Keller's alignment with Marx's philosophy underscores her belief in the transformative power of education and intellectual pursuits. Viewing education as inseparable from social and political activism, Keller emphasized the role of education in effecting social change and advancing societal progress (Keller, 1914)<sup>18</sup>. Despite being celebrated internationally as a symbol of American goodwill, Keller remained steadfast in her commitment to advocating for social justice and challenging oppressive systems (Nielsen, 2009).

Additionally, Keller's writings shed light on the social learning theory, highlighting the influence of environment and ideology on language development. In a capitalist society, where private interests often dictate educational systems, individuals, particularly those with disabilities, may face barriers to social interaction and language development. Keller's

advocacy for socialism reflects her belief in the importance of fostering inclusive environments that promote social interaction and support language development for all individuals (Keller, 1914).

## 5. The Unfinished Stories

Keller became an iconic figure and had her own enduring legacy in the twentieth century within the realm of disability rights and education, leaving a profound impact on the modern society. Despite her disabilities, Keller's voice resonated far beyond her individual experiences, shaping policies and attitudes toward people with disabilities in realms ranging from politics to education (Nielsen, 2009). However, the portrayal of Keller in contemporary education often omits her political views and activism, leading to a skewed understanding of her life and contributions (Loewen, 2008).

Keller's radical socialist beliefs, often overlooked in educational narratives, were central to her advocacy for social and political change (Loewen, 2008). Her commitment to socialism informed her efforts to address systemic issues of inequality and oppression, particularly concerning marginalized groups such as individuals with disabilities (Nielsen, 2009). Despite attempts to sanitize her image, Keller's political activism was integral to her mission of advancing social justice and equality (Nielsen, 2009). The absence of Keller's political activities in children's books perpetuates a sanitized version of her life and legacy, devoid of the context necessary to understand her courageous advocacy for social change (Christensen & Karp, 2003)<sup>19</sup>. While Keller's achievements are celebrated, the true depth of her activism and the driving force behind it are often obscured, hindering a comprehensive understanding of her contributions (Montgomery, 2010)<sup>20</sup>.

Critics argue that Keller's legacy cannot be accurately portrayed without acknowledging her socialist convictions and opposition to American capitalism (Carlson, 2016)<sup>21</sup>. To understand Keller's work and influence on education, one must confront her political views and their implications for her advocacy efforts (Eliassen, 2021)<sup>22</sup>. Failure to do so not only distorts Keller's legacy but also deprives children of a nuanced understanding of her life and the societal forces that shaped it (Alexander, 2020)<sup>23</sup>. Despite challenges in accurately depicting Keller's life, her legacy includes significant contributions to education through extensive fundraising efforts (Pawlik, 2019)<sup>24</sup>. Keller's ability to inspire generosity and mobilize support for educational initiatives benefited countless individuals with disabilities, contributing to the establishment of schools and programs that would otherwise not have been possible (Nielsen, 2009). Helen Keller's enduring influence on education and society transcends her disabilities,

encompassing a legacy of advocacy, activism, and philanthropy. To truly honour Keller's memory and contributions, it is imperative to acknowledge her socialist convictions and their profound impact on her life's work, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of her enduring legacy in education and beyond.

## 6. Denouement

Born in 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama, Keller's life was forever altered at the tender age of 19 months when an illness left her both deaf and blind. Despite these profound sensory limitations, Keller defied all odds, transcending her disabilities to become a beacon of hope and empowerment for millions around the world. Fuelled by an insatiable thirst for knowledge and a relentless spirit, Keller embarked on a remarkable journey of self-discovery and accomplishment. With the unwavering guidance of her devoted teacher, Anne Sullivan, Keller shattered barriers previously thought insurmountable. She learned to communicate through tactile sign language, mastered Braille, the first deaf-blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree from Radcliffe College.

Her legacy extends far beyond her academic achievements. She emerged as a fervent advocate for the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities, using her voice to amplify their struggles and champion their cause. Keller's eloquence, coupled with her unwavering commitment to social justice, made her a formidable force in the fight for equality and inclusion. Through this chapter we understood the life and legacy of Helen Keller, exploring her indelible impact as the voice of the disabled. From her pioneering educational philosophy to her tireless advocacy work, she stands as a testament to the power of resilience, perseverance and a pious human spirit that conquered the unattainable. As we unravel the layers of Keller's remarkable story, we gain insight into not only the challenges she faced but also the enduring lessons she imparted on generations to come.

This chapter delves into Helen Keller's educational philosophy and approach, exploring the influences, motivations, key contributions, insights, legacies, and ongoing impact of her work. Throughout her life, Keller's educational perspectives were shaped significantly by her teacher and guide, Anne Sullivan, particularly in the face of the immense challenges posed by Keller's deafness, blindness, and communication barriers. These early struggles profoundly influenced Keller's beliefs about education, laying the foundation for her ground-breaking contributions



in the field. Helen Keller, a name synonymous with resilience, determination, and advocacy, stands as a towering figure in the annals of history.

A central theme in Keller's educational philosophy was her insistence on learning "in the world," emphasizing the importance of contextualizing learning within the broader social and political realities of historical events (Eğmir & Çelik, 2019)<sup>25</sup>. While Keller herself was not a formal educator, her experiences and advocacy work directly informed her views on education. She advocated for an approach that blended elements of progressivism, allowing children autonomy in their educational pursuits, with critical theory, which emphasized the integration of education with meaningful social and political engagement. Keller believed that ignoring the complexities of social and political conflicts not only distorted historical narratives but also undermined students' understanding of the significance of these struggles. Despite the limited recognition of her educational ideas in contemporary discourse remains a pivotal figure in the history of educational philosophy, civil rights, and education. Her advocacy for inclusive, socially conscious education continues to inspire scholars and educators to recognize the importance of contextualizing learning within broader social and political frameworks. Keller's legacy serves as a reminder of the transformative power of education in shaping individuals and societies, and her contributions remain relevant in guiding contemporary educational practices toward greater inclusivity and social awareness.

In conclusion, Helen Keller's contributions to education and social change encompass a range of interconnected themes, from challenging economic inequality under capitalism to advocating for socialism as a means of fostering equality and inclusivity in education and society. Her insights into the role of emotions in education and the influence of environment on language development continue to resonate, offering valuable perspectives on the intersection of education, ideology, and social change.

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