A class by themselves?: the origins of special education in Toronto and beyond*Jason Ellis*

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Many of the ideas that underpin specialised education for children with disabilities in the Western world owe their impetus to the progressive ideals of the early 20th century. Progressives believed the application of science and rational and reasoned interventions in society would make a positive difference but they also indulged in a frenzy of measurement and categorisation that tipped into eugenics and ushered in bleak forms of social control, such as isolating those deemed unfit. As historians love to say, it's complicated, and there are few policy areas or periods as complicated as the education of children diverted into auxiliary (special) education because they had been labelled mentally defective or feeble-minded, or displayed other forms of disability.

Ellis deftly explains the complicated nature of the history of special education in Toronto. It is a slender book, just 211 pages of text, but it is informed by contemporary literature from America and Britain and set against a large body of historical research into progressive ideology and education. It is focused on Toronto but the trajectory Ellis charts can be seen across Canada and in the education and child welfare systems of other English-speaking nations, including America and Australia. Special education was an area where maternalist feminists and child savers came together with other social reformers and harnessed the administration and bureaucracy to combat the perceived social ills of children who were, as Ellis delicately states, exceptional.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Toronto, like most capital cities in the Pacific and Americas, had to address the demands of urbanisation as well as a sudden influx of culturally and religiously diverse migrants. Many new arrivals did not speak English well or at all, including Eastern European Jewish migrants. At the same time, crowding and poor sanitation caused horrific infant mortality rates, which social reformers, especially maternalist feminists, believed imperilled the white race. Reformers in Western nations devoted considerable energy to the development and codification of terms like “feeble-mindedness” and “mental deficiency” and devised theories and systems of education to isolate children and incarcerate adults who had the misfortune to be labelled in this way, both to stop these individuals reproducing and remediate them. In Toronto, the leading lights included school trustee Edith Lelean Groves and the educator and medical practitioner Helen MacMurchy, who was a powerful force in the National Council of Women. As a result of their work, Toronto introduced auxiliary classes for “mental defectives” and the “feeble-minded”, language schools for foreign children, and forest schools, which delivered education along with fresh air and nutrition to counter the miasma of the cities and the perceived deficits of the family home.

Ellis overtly rejects the temptation to laud reformers or condemn them for social control but reports on the breadth and complexity of their motivations. Those who instigated auxiliary education sought to remediate individuals as well as society, so offered education

that could be beneficial at the same time as it could be carceral. As Ellis tells, MacMurchy advocated hugely beneficial public health reforms, such as systematised advice to mothers, while advocating hard eugenic policies. We can condemn her for the latter, but the former still has value.

Ellis explains that the introduction of IQ testing in the 1920s refined the classification of children and entrenched the attitude that intelligence was innate and inherited. Remediation faded as a philosophy within auxiliary education, at the same time as vocationalism drove an emphasis on making children useful and self-sufficient. After disabled soldiers returned from the Great War, children's disabilities were viewed through a different lens. Classes fostered normalcy and self-reliance to minimise handicaps and children with physical disabilities were able to access a wider range of academic opportunities. Teachers demonstrated that IQ could be enhanced with systematic interventions. By the 1940s, educational philosophies had incorporated psychology and environmental philosophies and recognised the concept of special subject disability. Importantly, the authorities saw the value of keeping children in their home environment, instead of separating them into institutional care. Auxiliary education shifted focus to personality adjustment and child guidance within the school setting, but reached far more children as a result, and auxiliary classes survived into the later years of the 20th century. Toronto's education system now favours integration, as is the case in Australia and other Western nations.

The breadth of research in this book is formidable but it is particularly valuable because it centres the lives of the young people in these systems, using case files and school archives. The story that emerges is of young people and their families at particular points in the system: caught in the "testing moment" of the IQ test, when the shape of their entire education could be determined by their demeanour on the day; displaying resistance; working hard to escape the labels attached to them; or prospering and finding community and the sense of identity created by sharing their education with other children like them. Parents are shown advocating for their children, to access support and to direct their children's education, and to teach educators to recognise that a perceived deficit like deafness could be a source of strength if children were permitted to sign instead of forced into oralcy.

Ellis supplies a lengthy appendix to explain how he analysed the pupil record cards of key schools in the Toronto Board of Education. He calls these "documents of modern pupil accounting practices" and they reveal the demographics and ethnicities of the student body and show the language used by nurses, psychologists and teachers in key public schools. The shorthand on the index cards shows how bureaucracy reduces the individual by categorizing them for its own purposes.

This is an elegant book that illuminates the wider forces that guided educational policy in the English-speaking west in the 20th century and their complicated legacy and is of interest to historians of education and child welfare.

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