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Special Education as both History and Theory: Disability and the Possibility of Interdisciplinary Friendship: A Multilogue Response to Ellis, Osgood, and Warren

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Education's Histories

methodological grist for the
history of education

Notes

¹ See, for example, Eileen H. Tamura, ed., “Theory in Educational History,” Special issue, *History of Education Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2011).

Special Education as both History and Theory: Disability and the Possibility of Interdisciplinary Friendship: A Multilogue Response to Ellis, Osgood, and Warren

Benjamin Kelsey Kearl

I am excited by the responses that “Of Laggards and Morons” has generated from Jason Ellis, Robert Osgood, and Donald Warren. In attempting to reply to their insightful commentaries, I focus on the possibility of interdisciplinary friendship across education history and philosophy concerning not only the historical features and functions of special education but also the ways Progressive Era theories of human difference continue to haunt how education constitutes both itself and its subjects. Each of these efforts is informed by the scholarship of Bernadette Baker who serves as a model of this proposed historical-philosophical friendship.

Historicizing and Theorizing Special Education Together

Questions of theory are not new to education history, just as questions of history are not new to education theory.¹ These questions bring history and theory and into conversation as mutually constitutive *doings*—history theorizes and theory historicizes. Good history is thus more than a recitation of past occurrences. Similarly, good theory is more than an ideological lens into which the

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² Donald Warren, "Escaping Befriended Circles: A Multilogue Response to Benjamin Kearsal's 'Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity and the Theory of Progressive Era Special Education,'" *Education's Histories*, December 16, 2016, <http://www.educationshistories.org/escaping-befriended-circles-a-multilogue-response-to-benjamin-kearsal-of-laggards-and-morons-definitional-fluidity-borderlinity-and-the-theory-of-progressive-era-special-education/>.

³ John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1938), 25.

⁴ For more on this point see Adrea Lawrence, "The Trickster, Our School," *Education's Histories*, May 1, 2014, <http://www.educationshistories.org/series/our-trickster-the-school/> and Donald Warren, "Waging War on Education: American Indian Version," *Education's Histories*, July 29, 2015, <http://www.educationshistories.org/waging-war-education-american-indian-versions/>.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, Vol. 2, ed. James D. Faubion (New York, The New Press, 2000), 131-33.

⁶ Bernadette Baker, "The Purpose of History? Curriculum Studies, Invisible Objects and Twenty-first Century Societies," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 29, no. 1 (2013): 26.

past is pressed into view; it is rather, as Warren suggests, a prism that refracts light into spectrums that complicate what is being viewed.² If history and theory work in concert, so too do empirics and theory with the important caveat that empirical phenomena do not exist apart from their method of observation. After all, as John Dewey reminds us: "To know the meaning of empiricism, we need to understand what experience is."³ Within education, this empirical caveat gains import due to the propensity to dismiss as non- or mis-educative whatever observers do not recognize through the most convenient of education lenses, the school.⁴ Such "regimes of truth" enable education to make sense of what and whom is being viewed with the implication that observing human difference is what allows education to envision itself.⁵

The argument I make in "Of Laggards and Morons" has similar ocular implications. That is, I maintain that to fully witness our educational present education historians and philosophers as well as policymakers must pass through the spectral refractions that special education casts upon general education. Baker helps to explain the importance of this movement:

If disciplines require compartmentalization and boundaries and if written History in the Academy in a variety of geopolitical locales must be predicated on an empirical condition of proof which requires an ocular portal and consensus around what is seen, how is it that some objects described as invisible become legitimated as real and continuously operationalized and not others, and why?⁶

Of interest to Baker is why the child mind became an object of empirical study for the emerging discipline of psychology when an equally invisible phenomenon like the ghost did not garner similar academic support. This discrepancy suggests that history has a purpose, which Baker analyzes through juxtaposing four ways of thinking historically. The first puts into conversation the presumed link between history, correction, and subject-shaping with a hyper-presentism that ignores history as a way of escaping identity conflicts altogether. The second juxtaposition forces a dialogue between Darwinian evolution and proponents of theological devolution who maintain that human beings

⁷ Ibid., 27-31.

⁸ Bernadette Baker, "Making History, Making Humans," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 20, no. 3 (1999): 357-80.

⁹ While the reconstruction imagined in "Of Laggards and Morons" is specific to problematizing Progressive Era special education, Colin Koopman has developed a helpful pragmatic reading of genealogy that combines Foucault's use of history to problematize the present with Dewey's use of history to reconstruct the past; see *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 217-70.

¹⁰ Jason Ellis, "The Theory of Special Education and the Necessity of Historicizing: A Multilogue Response to Benjamin Kelsey Kearl and Donald Warren," *Education's Histories*, January 31, 2017, <http://www.educationshistories.org/the-theory-of-special-education-and-the-necessity-of-historicizing-a-multilogue-response-to-benjamin-kelsey-kearl-and-donald-warren/>. Osgood also notes that "Of Laggards and Morons" suggests a true theory of Progressive Era special education; see "Beyond Laggards and Morons: The Complicated World of Special Education," *Education's Histories*, February 14, 2017, <http://www.educationshistories.org/beyond-laggards-and-morons-the-complicated-world-of-special-education/>.

¹¹ Ellis, "The Theory of Special Education and the Necessity of Historicizing."

¹² Ibid. Specifically, Ellis, citing Robert L. Osgood, *The History of Special Education: A Struggle for Equality in American Public Schools* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), draws attention to the historical existence of "sight-saving, speech correction, and hard-of-hearing or deaf classes" as well as "forest schools for the sickly, foreign classes for the newly arrived immigrant, and orthopedic classes for children with physical disabilities."

devolved into matter from pure consciousness. Next Buddhist questioning of whether there is such a thing as a self is juxtaposed with the location of the self in indigenous paradigms in an external, animate cosmos. Lastly, technology is seen as either rescuing history or as a historical condition from which humanity is in need of rescue.⁷ Baker also notes how juxtapositions of science and religion do not necessarily produce neat opposites, but rather amalgamating, antagonistic, and fluid regimes of truth that can be conscripted by either party to warrant their respective historical-empirical claims.⁸

These juxtapositions are useful here in highlighting the ways historical thinking can extend beyond either/or distinctions in which empirical historicizations are positioned as oppositional and/or temporally prior to theoretical speculations. For example, writing Native American history from within a theoretical assumption that there are internally individuated selves presents historians with problematic understandings as does observing American education from a historical position that eclipses the extant educative practices of indigenous peoples. Thinking historically, then, is *both* a historical *and* a theoretical process within which it is unclear which has ontological priority or should be given argumentative preference. As suggested in "Of Laggards and Morons," the history and theory of Progressive Era special education occurred together as education practiced defining itself through empirical classifications of human difference. Reconstructing such doings can help to elucidate, even if only in a refracted manner, the haunting legacy of classifying human differences.⁹

Either/or distinctions inform Ellis' call for the importance of historicizing as a way of countering the imposition of any "one true" theory of special education.¹⁰ Of concern to Ellis is that absent empirical accounts of its varied features and functions, special education is reducible to theoretical descriptions of social control. Against the easiness of such descriptions, Ellis argues that "'special education' is still very important in its own right, quite aside from what it can tell us about general education."¹¹ In highlighting this importance, Ellis links what it means to historicize special education first to the capacity to draw distinctions around the various features of Progressive Era special education, and secondly to the capacity to differentiate special education's varied and contradictory functions.¹² Of the five possible functions of special education, "Of Laggards and Morons" reflects only one: categorizing, tracking, and controlling disabled, different, difficult, or even

threatening children. These two ways of historicizing special education provide the backdrop for Ellis' more emphatic claim that within education's histories special education is overly theorized. Osgood is also invested in the empirical features of Boston common schools and the functions of their differentiated curricular spaces.¹³

¹³ Robert L. Osgood, "Undermining the Common School Ideal: Intermediate Schools and Ungraded Classes in Boston, 1838-1900," *History of Education Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1997): 375-98; and Osgood, "Beyond Laggards and Morons."

Osgood's response is attentive to the lack of needed distinctions in "Of Laggards and Morons." Specifically, Osgood notes that the lack of any development of the methodological observation that education has and enacts a biography makes it difficult to distinguish the relevancy of this approach. Equally problematic for Osgood is the philosophical consideration that education generally defies definition. This consideration is important given the complex ways education manifests itself "differently in different countries, regions, states, locations, and public/private support."¹⁴ Closely related to this point are the multidimensional complexities of not only Progressive Era education but also special education's varied place and role within this complicated educational world as well as the location of school professionals. Like Ellis' distinctive functions of special education, Osgood notes institutional features that might give pause to the claim that special education generally defines education. These include: segregated settings for normal and abnormal children, separate training for special and regular classroom teachers, and antagonistic "empire building" practices through which special educationalists seek "greater power, influence, resources, and territory" by "cutting into the world of regular education."¹⁵

¹⁴ Osgood, "Beyond Laggards and Morons."

¹⁵ Ibid.

Ellis and Osgood's commentaries necessitate important reconsiderations of "Of Laggards and Morons." Taken separately, Ellis seems to be asking more of history to help offset theory, while Osgood seems to be asking more of theory to help clarify history. Taken together, these two distinguished historians of special education highlight the limitations of my own historical thinking about special education. I clearly have more work to do along the mutually constitutive paths of special education history and theory. Osgood's own work at tracing the historical shifts in disability labeling and institutional formation is a helpful philosophical resource.¹⁶ "Of Laggards and Morons" is complementary to such efforts in that it posits error as amongst the reasons why and how labels and institutions changed over time. Following Warren, we might ask: How do we write an education

¹⁶ Robert Osgood, "Language, Labels, and Lingering (Re)considerations: The Evolution and Function of Terminology in Special Education," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 37 (2006): 135-45.

¹⁷ Warren, “Escaping Befriended Circles.”

¹⁸ For more on this point see Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontologies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). In his essay “Making Up People,” Hacking argues for a “dynamic nominalism” in which persons come into being at the same time as this or that category of person is invented/discovered such that “making up people changes the space of possibilities for personhood,” 106-7.

¹⁹ Jason Ellis, “‘Inequalities of Children in Original Endowment’: How Intelligence Testing Transformed Early Special Education in a North American City School System,” *History of Education Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2013): 409-14; and Ellis, “The Theory of Special Education and the Necessity of Historicizing.”

²⁰ Ellis, “‘Inequalities of Children in Original Endowment,’” 414-23.

²¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis added. For a different reading of Terman’s intervention into intelligence testing that problematizes his diagnosing of learning problems see Tyson E. Lewis, “Education and the Immunization Paradigm,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 28, no. 6 (2009): 485-98.

²² Lewis Terman, *The Measure of Intelligence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 87.

²³ *Ibid.*, 87-8.

history of errors whose miscalculations nonetheless continue to constitute education and its subjects?¹⁷ Irony, rather than evolution, helps to answer this question. Irony is detectable not only in noting how celebratory and empowering first-person labels come to replace terminology that degrades and marginalizes but also in observing to whom—which bodies—disability labels are made available, what labels are associated with which bodies, and how disability labeling continues to simultaneously make possible and obfuscate segregation. Within such observations, indeterminately defined labels and spaces work reciprocally to both make educated subjects and to populate educational worlds.¹⁸

Ellis’ discussion of Lewis Terman’s intervention into the nature and causes of learning problems is also helpful in journeying along the path of special education history and theory.¹⁹ This discussion suggests that intelligence testing grew to prominence because it could explain in scientific detail learning problems whereas administrative progressives like Leonard Ayes could only postulate a general backwardness. Terman’s intervention leads Ellis to *theorize* the existence of a “testing moment,” which students could potentially resist.²⁰ While Ellis’ efforts to complicate special educations’ functions is helpful, as presented, they appear as distinctions without a difference. For example, diagnosing and treating children “who *should* have been able to read, but could not” is not only about classifying dis/ability according to a borderline of ab/normality but also about determining which bodies should be performing ability better than other bodies.²¹ As argued in “Of Laggards and Morons,” such determinations occur against a historical backdrop of indeterminate definitions of human difference.

In *The Measure of Intelligence*, for example, Terman notes that borderline cases are “not marked off by definite IQ limits,” which means that some borderline cases are able “to manage as adults [and] to get along fairly well in a simple environment.”²² This is because “the ability to compete with one’s fellows in the social and industrial world does not depend upon intelligence alone. Such factors as moral traits, industry, environment to be encountered, personal appearance, and influential relatives are also involved.”²³ A similar definitional indeterminacy facilitated the development of the learning disability label. Progressive Era practices of theorizing human difference thus anticipate a subsequent

²⁴ Christine E. Sleeter, “Why is there Learning Disabilities? A Critical Analysis of the Birth of the Field in its Context,” in *The Formation of School Subjects: The Struggle for Creating an American Institution*, ed. Thomas S. Popkewitz (New York: The Falmer Press, 1987), 226.

²⁵ This use of “keeping track” is in reference to Jeannie Oakes’ classic study, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

²⁶ Baker, “The Purpose of History?” 33. Original emphasis.

²⁷ Bernadette Baker, “‘Childhood’ in the Emergence and Spread of U.S. Public Schools,” in *Foucault’s Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Marie Brennan (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998): 123-37.

desire for a *testing moment* that “explained reading problems of white middle class children without raising questions about the cultural integrity of middle class homes.”²⁴ If disability labels are not ahistorical, but are constituted by, within, and for theories of human difference, then both history and theory are equally helpful in asking, for instance, what counts as “learning” for an LD label or as an “emotion” for an ED label and why and to whom *keeping track* of these differences matters.²⁵

The Haunting Legacy of Classifying Human Differences

Baker’s above juxtapositions not only highlight different ways of thinking historically but also the importance of theoretical considerations to this thinking. More specifically, “how belief in the existence and characteristic of mind becomes and continues to be an administrative platform, plane of composition, and site of dis/qualification in the face of historical insults and injuries that have divided populations in the United States.”²⁶ In problematizing how the child mind became scientized by, within, and for education, Baker also suggests how ways of seeing determine who—which bodies—count as being located within history; that is, which bodies are afforded a childhood.²⁷ Those “savage” populations encountered through colonialism were thus infants who existed outside the history of Western civilization. Progressive Era education was tasked with advancing these populations out of their atavistic ways through adolescence and into adulthood. Colonized bodies were thus made into subjects of education by first becoming objects of historical inquiry.

Returning to *The Measure of Intelligence*, Terman was less than sanguine about the task set before education when it came to “Indians, Mexicans, and negroes”:

Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods.

The writer predicts that when this is done there will be discovered enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, *differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture.*²⁸

²⁸ Terman, 91-2. Emphasis added.

While the racist tendency of naturalizing intelligence as hereditary perhaps falls within Ellis' criticism concerning the easy quotability of eugenic discourses, Terman's observation that new experimental methods will be required to understand differences in mental traits and his assertion that such differences cannot be ameliorated through learning not only posits the existence of learning deficits but also substantiates deficit thinking as a scientifically valid way of understanding human differences; a way of historical thinking that continues to haunt education and colonize its subjects.

The recapitulationism of child development specialists like G. Stanley Hall and the philosophical theories of mind from psychologists like William James also informed the scientific and nationalist realities of which bodies were empirically and thus also imperially adult. These theories were not only made to apply to colonized populations, but also to Black children already within America's slave economy. Western nations justified their observing and classifying children of color and colonized populations by virtue of having already empirically defined themselves as being within history's temporal borders. While Ellis and Osgood's argument that "Of Laggards and Morons" posits a true theory of Progressive Era special education does not go unnoticed, I would suggest that more central to my argument is how indeterminate labels and categorical spaces are *vital forces* whose regimes of truth work to constitute education by offering a picture of reality through which it can envision both itself and its subjects. To suggest that theories of special education operate *as if* they are true and to then account for the *effects* of these truth operations is not the same as positing a true theory of special education.

Osgood notes that "Of Laggards and Morons" is on to something; specifically, I help to substantiate inclusionist claims that "it's *all* special education."²⁹ Such praise notwithstanding, I cannot help but wonder if this directionality works the other way—that is, it's *all* general education. Understanding that a complete discussion of inclusion debates is beyond the scope of this reply, "Of Laggards and

²⁹ Osgood, "Beyond Laggards and Morons." Original emphasis.

³⁰ For an analysis of inclusion debates see Thomas M. Skrtic, *Disability & Democracy: Reconstructing (Special) Education for Postmodernity* (New York: Teachers College Record, 1995).

³¹ Osgood, “Beyond Laggards and Morons.” Original emphasis.

³² For an example of this present see Nirmala Erelles and Andrea Minear, “Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Leonard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013). For a discussion of biopolitics see Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds., “Biopolitics: An Encounter,” in *Biopolitics: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). Specifically, the authors note that biopolitical racism “doesn’t seek to exclude certain populations from the institutions of civil and political life; it explains why, despite so many painstaking attempts at inclusion, certain populations nevertheless seem permanently incapable of achieving flourishing lives within those institutions,” 19. For more on this implication see Warren Montag, “Toward a Conception of Racism without Race: Foucault and Contemporary Biopolitics,” *Phi* 13 (2002): 111-24.

Morons” seeks to *historicize* how persons with disabilities come to be included within general education.³⁰ Here disability labeling and the categorical spaces of special education work in concert to reciprocally define and populate general educational worlds through the use of, for example, juridically configured individual education plans. The use of rights-based tactics of inclusion thus seems to belie Osgood’s insistence that there are “significant distinctions between the concepts of *disability* and *special education*.”³¹ Instead, “Of Laggards and Morons” shows how the indeterminate uses of disability labels makes inclusion more likely for bodies already proximally located along the normative borders of general education. Uses of disability labeling also run counter to Ellis’ insistence that special education be considered apart from its general education implications and the easy quotability of eugenicists like Henry H. Goddard.

Ellis and Osgood’s argument that “Of Laggards and Morons” overemphasizes the social controlling features of special education at the expense of its ameliorative functions also does not go unnoticed. While acknowledging this theoretical propensity, I would push back that writing in this direction is made easy by the quotability of eugenic discourses by suggesting that education has still not adequately addressed how its classificatory past makes possible a biopolitically racist present.³² Still, Ellis and Osgood ask an important question: If special education services are so controlling, then how is it that these provisions uplift this or that student? While special education can be benevolent, it is important to recognize that amelioration relies on locating individual students along a continuum of dis/ability in which students are distanced from each other in proximal relation to the features and functions of their human differences. Hence the insistence upon “severe” categories of disability. Rather than taking a normative position on whether special education is benevolent or malevolent, “Of Laggards and Morons” instead invites discussion of the uses of special education towards these two ends.

Just as there is not a true theory of special education, its regimes of truth are not universally applicable across student bodies. “Of Laggards and Morons” thus does not preclude benevolent understandings of special education; rather, it seeks to incite education history and philosophy as well as policymakers to be attentive to who—which bodies—are ameliorated by, within, and for

special education. Baker helps explain the importance of this incitation:

The analyses of exam results that point to which populational groups fail or succeed at what do not simply tell us of the existence of racism or sexism or classism or ableism. Exams are already the vectors of such –isms, sites for the recirculation of power, a form of discipline and punishment that assumes ontologies can be segregated, graded, and differentially valued before any body-mind even enters the examination room.³³

³³ Bernadette Baker, “The Hunt for Disability: The New Eugenics and the Normalization of School Children,” *Teachers College Record* 104, no. 4 (2002): 694.

At stake for Baker here is questioning whether it is possible to imagine education otherwise. Alternatives to special education’s classificatory past continue to be haunted by scientifically and juridically configured inscriptions of dis/ability within which the child mind continually becomes an object of inquiry that is made to empirically reflect an already measured reality. Such reflections, in turn, become conditions of truth about who children are even before their minds can be examined. The child mind was made to visibly reflect such a reality by being positioned against the equally invisible ghost. This juxtaposition substantiated the empirical and material nature of the child mind while also producing the measurable effects of this nature. The disavowal of the ghost as immaterial and thus beyond the empiric temporality of this reality is perhaps not that dissimilar to Darwin’s biologically historicized human being. In each moment, human beings are made through and different by their inscription within history.

Our collective *inability* to imagine education otherwise is thus telling of how education continues to be colonized by a reality that envisions both itself and its subjects in terms of having to prove an ability to do something and to succeed in the direction that such abilities are measured. While debates over the degree to which certain child minds need help in proving themselves as such or whether such proof is even necessary remain important, the difficulty in imagining education without these debates will persist until education can imagine itself differently. Disability is an affirmative, embodied position from which such imaginings are possible as well as a critical positionality from which education history and philosophy can foster friendship.

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