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Escaping Befriended Circles: A Multilogue Response to Benjamin Kelsey Kears's "Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity, Borderlinity, and the Theory of Progressive Era Special Education (Parts 1 & 2)"

Donald Warren

Indiana University - Bloomington, dwarren@indiana.edu

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Education's Histories

methodological grist for the
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Notes

Escaping Befriended Circles: A Multilogue Response to Benjamin Kelsey Kearl's "Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity, Borderlinitz, and the Theory of Progressive Era Special Education (Parts 1 & 2)"

Donald Warren

Benjamin Kearl offers an overview of the twentieth-century development of special education in the United States. The reconstruction draws together fugitive and fragmented literature that he treats as primary sources needing context and validation. He delivers both convincingly and ably, applying historiographical and philosophical standards. The result is a provocative, aggravating history of historic errors, a history of not merely miseducation but also anti-education. Unrepentant irony courses the story as a connecting theme. The damage stretches from special education into education itself. Cutting across multiple disciplines, Kearl gives us an urgent research agenda littered with landmines of various sorts and temptations to settle for the faulty science that gave us the narrative in the first place.

The densely packed paper thus raises critical issues regarding the general study of education. They seem to be directed principally to historians, but Kearl's analysis and its implications reach farther and deeper. He has penned a broadside and knows it. The title is properly specific, with little hint of what follows, although "definitional fluidity" may be a giveaway. Readers with pictures of education in their heads can expect surprises. Kearl's contributions range across methodological and topical

Donald Warren is professor emeritus at the Indiana University School of Education. He can be reached at dwarren@indiana.edu.

concerns, including relevant policies and their authors' conceptual orientations. He challenges common thinking about education, a habit of mind he faults as intellectually and morally deficient. The essay seethes.

Kearl intends to start a conversation, perhaps to end an older misguided one, and lay a foundation for fresh thinking. Relative to the last point, I am tempted to add that he wants to begin constructing perimeters to focus the proposed inquiry, but his preliminary analysis pretty much destroys productive use of border terminology in education research, save in warning us about ideas, definitions, and actions to avoid. History and philosophy inform his perspective and provide his toolset. The sources and methods of both disciplines are essential, he argues, and they complement each other. We need conceptual clarity and acknowledgement that it never arrives context free. Time, place, and principal actors intersect to shape the "use value" of ideas. Documentation and analysis may reveal them to be illogical, dicta seeking only administrative efficiencies, self-serving opinions of experts defending or promoting their reputations, or blind affirmations of cultural biases. A host of interested constituents benefit from parsings of whether the ideas pose physical, moral, or venal dangers relative to the welfare of special education's proposed beneficiaries. Keeping the endpoint in mind is crucial, assuming the field's purpose is to edify, to advance learning as a process and destination.

Kearl proposes we move toward that goal with greater assurance methodologically by examining education biographically. This means, of course, that we pay close attention to human factors while probing the ways education has defined itself. The latter send education into troubling waters, a self-powered momentum. It casts education as an entity in its own history, a force replete with assumptions and classificatory schemes immune or hostile to children's learning. As a research problem, education acquires intellectual and moral qualities. Kearl's treatment employs special education, his specific topic, as a prism, an analytical tool uniquely able to refract light beyond itself across education generally. He makes a compelling case for conjoined history and philosophy in policy studies.

Consulting widely for possibly useful materials, he pushes outside the usual confines of education's histories. See, for instance, his authoritative notes on U.S. historians Drew Gilpin Faust and Louis Menand. He also cites work by Adrea Lawrence and Sara Clark, neither of whom takes the embedded education narrative at face value. Like Kearl, they qualify as outliers. Among his other references are studies drawing on one or another of the social sciences. They challenge special education's standard fare, substantively and methodologically, but like it, they tend to be isolated studies rarely consulted by scholars and practitioners in other fields. One of Kearl's telling contributions is an expansion of the relevant literature that forces estranged sources into conversation with each other. The approach enables us to frame sharper historical and philosophical questions regarding special education and its professional family. Here again irony rears its head. If special education is supposed to be a separate field, as its advocates insist, why and how have its guiding ideas, practices, and policies mirrored general schooling in such detail? Or has influence moved the other way?

In addressing the uncertainty, Kearl discharges his heaviest weapons. The target becomes education science. Its proponents veered sharply and fatefully from paths being blazed early in the twentieth century within physical and natural sciences toward preoccupations of widely discredited eugenics and social Darwinism, buttressed by ever more refined calculations and evolving classifications of special education "conditions." Kearl detects the trend's precedents in the origins of the common school and the founding rationales of public education articulated by the likes of Horace Mann and Henry Barnard in the Jacksonian and antebellum eras. The problem was the reformers' discomfort with what they deemed obvious exceptions to inclusive rhetoric. The aim and policy justification of "publicly" funded schooling amounted to what we today call equal opportunity for all, but some students were judged unequal to schooling tasks. They presented deficits requiring uncommon curriculums, pedagogies, and for designated populations separate institutions. These turned out to be those with physical and mental limitations, but also others from immigrant backgrounds or who had variously defined delinquency histories. Cultural differences colored judgements.

Kearl skims this history in order to land more squarely amid the origins of special education classifications and the beginnings of educational measurement early in the twentieth century. Both

were guilty of circular reasoning, self-fulfilling prophecies, uncritical deference to experts, and related missteps into ersatz science. The aims were to confirm and reinforce assertions, as opposed to those endorsed by contemporary pioneers in science to correct findings and prove hypotheses unfounded. This aura of self-congratulation coincided with the beginning professionalization of education, visible in a hardening of the mission of the National Education Association away from the interests and presumably lower status of teachers, and founding of the American Educational Research Association. AERA is celebrating its centennial year in 2016, an inclination hard to reconcile with its likely impetus. How should we celebrate scientifically a history rooted in anti-science? Constructed as untroubled evolution, building from project to project, science can slide unnoticed from its mission to discover. Is the tendency pronounced in education science and special education? If so, their findings warrant Kears's skepticism and critical attention by teachers, students, parents, policymakers, and scholars.

Effects of the circular reasoning of “the theory of Progressive Era special education” leak farther afield. To find them isn't easy given their camouflage. We need the blend of the history and philosophy Kears executes. The colonial mindset he uncovers in special education, rule by experts who trimmed science to fit their procrustean bed of assumptions and predispositions, also shaped the agendas of Progressive Education generally. It was blatantly evident in school reforms imposed in Caribbean nations and the Philippines, as the U. S. entered its overt empire-building phase in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We are overdue for a fresh critique of Progressive Education liberated from celebratory tones and breathless gratitude to John Dewey. Recall that he renounced adulation as a research format many years ago, asking skeptically what exactly was progressive about Progressive Education as a reform movement. Kears sets before us an intriguing, under explored trail, opened from inquiry on special education.

His agenda sketches work to be done, and it promises to be a labor of Sisyphus with no end in sight. Case studies will draw from interdependent historical and philosophical methods, and substantively, they may confirm his hypothesis that special education offers entree to other education projects. Cross-national and global inquiry can help us learn whether the deficiencies he uncovers originated

in and slanted U.S. education or had a broader reach. Should we think of education as a culture and study it as such? Thanks to Kearl, the question suggests an entirely different approach to education, its historical and philosophical nutrients, and its extensions in policy and practice.

His examination of special education and its extended proponents and collaborators reminded me of the characters in Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Iceman Cometh*. Voluntary prisoners of a bar they frequented, besotted by drink, habitues found comfort in affirming each other’s delusions and devised rituals, complete with benedictions, to bestir forward movement. But they never moved, except around the bar, their hope a decked-out exaggeration of hopelessness, a literary excursion into circular reasoning toward its destination.



Education’s Histories would like to thank Donald Warren for his careful review of Benjamin Kelsey Kearl’s essay, “Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity, Borderlinity, and the Theory of Progressive Era Special Education (Parts 1 & 2)” and for allowing us to publish his review in our experimental multilogue format.



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