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Notes

¹ Benjamin Kelsey Kears, "Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity, Borderlinity, and the Theory of Progressive Era Special Education (Part 1)," *Education's Histories*, November 15, 2016, <http://www.educationshistories.org/laggards-morons-definitional-fluidity-borderlinity-theory-progressive-era-special-education-part-1/>.

Beyond Laggards and Morons: The Complicated World of Special Education

A Multilogue Response to Benjamin Kelsey Kears's "Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity, Borderlinity, and the Theory of Progressive Era Special Education"

Robert L. Osgood

Benjamin Kears's "Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity, Borderlinity, and the Theory of Progressive Special Education" constitutes a complex, ambitious, and provocative reassessment of central aspects of the early days of public special education in the United States. Drawing on a variety of primary and secondary sources, Kears attempts to describe how a true theory of progressive special education represents an essential aspect of "how education, through its various classificatory schemes, defines itself."¹ Kears revisits initiatives to bring efficiency and purpose to public education through its Progressive Era efforts to delineate more fully and accurately the nature of learning and cultural differences among schoolchildren by refining the manner and working definitions used in determining these differences. In the process, he explores the development of the classificatory term "moron" to demonstrate how such efforts and definitions changed over time as education sought to situate itself in the pantheon of progressive institutions during the early 1900s. In discussing this history, Kears offers refreshing new views of how "special education" emerged as a significant component of public schooling, one more closely related to traditional or "regular" education than other historians have argued. His explorations raise new questions as well as touch on more entrenched cautionary concerns about issues of definitions, labeling, scientific judgments,

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and the often difficult, long-term relations between traditional classrooms and segregated settings for those students identified as exceptional.

In his introduction, Kearsal underscores his primary thesis: “*In employing biography as a method of inquiring, this essay argues that education’s life history is related to how special education classifies the subjects of education. This biography suggests that special education is not something that ‘general education’ does but is what education generally is.*”² He claims that this approach:

reifies education as a persona that acts on its own rather than as something that is enacted by students, teachers, administrators, or policymakers. The language of education defining itself is used here to draw attention to this reification and the ways that classificatory schemes do more than define the subjects of education as this or that label, but how these schemes also give education itself coherence as a subject. This methodological implication is important given education’s desire for a theory of special education.³

Basic to this approach is Kearsal’s claim that two key elements lie at the foundation of education’s attempts to define itself: *definitional fluidity* and *borderlinity*. “Definitional fluidity and borderlinity,” writes Kearsal, “are necessary requirements of any classificatory scheme.” Redefining these terms and their content based on “the shortcomings of any particular classification” as unveiled through experience or experimentation does “not undermine the science itself, but instead only warrant the need for greater scientific accuracy. A difficulty with this warrant is that *more science* becomes the only way of redressing bad science....In working to define the categorical spaces of normality and abnormality education itself becomes generally defined.”⁴ Using the terms and concepts of “laggard” and “moron” (including their moral as well as cognitive components), the essay explores in depth how definitions change over time as a result of new “science” and new practical understandings (*definitional fluidity*). It also examines how the envisioning of the ways schools should address these shifts in understandings leads to restructuring of classificatory schemes

² Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

⁵ Kearl, “Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity, Borderlinity, and the Theory of Progressive Era Special Education (Part 2),” *Education’s Histories*, November 17, 2016, <http://www.educationshistories.org/laggards-morons-definitional-fluidity-borderlinity-theory-progressive-era-special-education-part-2/>.

⁶ The term “Taylorism” was widely used during the early 1900s to refer to efforts to employ “a business efficiency imposed on the schools.” The idea was to run schools as a business and make educational decisions a function of practicality and efficiency, using a model of a smoothly operating business in designing and operating public school systems. See Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education 1876-1957* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 158n. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School*; Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Joel H. Spring, *The Sorting Machine: National Educational Policy Since 1945* (McKay, 1976), 1. David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

and the rethinking of why certain children belong in certain places within formal education—“the space of overlap between normality and abnormality” (*borderlinity*).⁵

Kearl’s essay is a complex investigation of a variety of issues, primarily those of Progressive Era attempts to structure schools more efficiently and produce more useful outcomes, i.e., workers and citizens for a new industrial society. The notion of early twentieth century schools adapting to new social and economic realities, the employment of Taylorism in school organization and restructuring, and the realities of schools marking clear delineations in ways students are taught and what students were to study have been explored in depth by scholars such as Lawrence Cremin, Herbert Kliebard, Joel Spring, David Tyack, and Raymond Callahan.⁶ What Kearl brings new to the table is the idea that these efforts were and continue to be part and parcel of developed “theory of progressive special education,” the ultimate impact of which has been to incorporate and exemplify all the essential functions of a reified “education.” His essay reflects a sophisticated awareness of the complicated transitions of labels and school structures related to disability. His discussion of the evolution of the term “moron” is enlightening, and the journey the term undergoes when being applied to school settings is presented with insight and nuance. However, while certainly ambitious and original—two qualities essential to the progress of good social and intellectual history—it does raise certain questions and caveats.

To begin with, readers would benefit from a more extensive discussion and literature review of the method of applying biography to an institution. His assertion that education as an institution seems to act on its own without input from teachers, administrators, or other participants in its development and practice needs clarification: If these people aren’t changing and defining education, who—or what—is? Examples of how a social institution acts on its own, and/or references to the literature that could explain this, would be most helpful.

Of more common concern is the millennia-long discussion of “defining education.” This is a question that is at least as much philosophical as it is historical or practical. Kearl thus understandably does not attempt to answer “how education defines itself,” except in the confines of identifying student

difference as a fundamental function and characteristic. Education is of course multi-layered, complex, and manifested differently in different countries, regions, states, locations, and public/private support. In many ways it defies definition. I would be eager to get a better sense of what that definition looks like to Kearl and how it reflects more than anything a “progressive theory of special education.”

Related to this are the multidimensional concepts of Progressivism and the Progressive Era. “Progressive education” is often constructed as child-centered, social, interactive, hands on learning—Dewey’s notion of the New Education as opposed to the Old Education. But Progressivism applied to education during the Progressive Era also embodies the factory model of schooling, compulsory education, manual/vocational training, and schools being used as training grounds for workers and citizens who would do what they were told to serve the modern world. Even special education walked both these worlds: It served special education as a sorter of children for society’s sake and a mechanism for helping schools run more efficiently, while also demonstrating new approaches to curriculum and instruction that exhibited not only sorting and efficiency but also individualized instruction and hands-on, project-based learning.⁷ Thus any “theory of progressive special education” requires greater detail and complexity than a general understanding of it as a producer of classificatory systems used by all of “regular” education.

Finally, Kearsall could and should address the long-held understanding that special education and regular education do in fact exhibit significant distinctions that would inhibit, or at least give pause to, the idea that special education can and does indeed define regular education. The long history of segregated settings for “feble-minded” and “normal” children in sizable public school systems, the history of separating the training and diminishing the status of special education teachers from regular education teachers, the notion of “empire building” that arose during the 1950s and 1960s claiming that special education was seeking greater power, influence, resources, and territory that was seen as cutting into the world of regular education—and the animosity that accompanied those charges for decades—all suggest that special education and regular education have long been at odds with each other over a number of critical issues since the term “special education” first came to

⁷ See for example Special Class Teachers of Boston, *The Boston Way: Plans for the Development of the Individual Child*, 4th ed. (Boston, 1928), a lengthy curriculum designed for children with cognitive disabilities that was used in public schools nationwide. See also Robert L. Osgood, *For “Children Who Vary from the Normal Type”: Special Education in Boston 1838-1930* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2000), 142.

mean working with children with deficiencies or disabilities at the National Education Association's 1902 annual meeting.⁸

Other methodological and thematic questions emerge from Kearl's important essay that move beyond concepts of the relation and overlap between what is called "special education" and "regular education." First, any fully informed discussion of the relationship between special education and regular education—especially as depicted in Kearl's figures presented early in the essay—can and should benefit from the extensive and multifaceted voices of school professionals themselves. Elizabeth Farrell was most certainly a crucial early player in the emergence of any theory and practice of special education, but Kearl seems to focus much more on the work of professors, medical personnel, directors of public and private residential institutions, and recognized experts in the field of feeble-mindedness, especially H. H. Goddard. The debates and evidence Kearl presents come extensively from the *Journal of Psycho-Asthenics* and other appropriate professional literature; it would be helpful to know if the authors held positions in schools and if the view of the public school professional is sufficiently represented in the discourse. For example, Edwin Seaver, Superintendent for the Boston Public Schools for twenty critical years, commented on distinctions among "grades" of feeble-mindedness well before Goddard addressed the issue of the complicated nature of "filling" the category of "moron" and the struggles surrounding such efforts in 1910.⁹

Kearl's use of biography to examine this history is original and thought provoking. Even so, any biography must consider the whole entity, which from the start makes this approach more appropriate for a monograph-length work than an essay such as this. I would certainly encourage Kearl to continue to pursue this approach. In doing so, I do ask that he keep in mind that issues such as labeling, the use of labels other than the moron for cognitive disability, the medicalization of disability and special education throughout the 1800s and 1900s, and the crucial, significant distinctions between the concepts of *disability* and *special education* all constitute important considerations as biographical components that arose during the Progressive Era.¹⁰

This essay holds much promise for rethinking our perceptions of distinctions between special

⁸ For a thorough discussion of the rise and entrenchment of special education programs within public school systems as well as examples of professional critique and debate on this issue see Robert L. Osgood, *The History of Inclusion in the United States* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2005), pp. 72-93.

⁹ *22nd Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, 1902*, Appendix pp. 54-55.

¹⁰ For discussion of the nature and dynamics of labeling in the areas of disability and special education see Robert L. Osgood, "Language, Labels, and Lingering (Re)Considerations: The Evolution and Function of Terminology in Special Education," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 37 (2006), pp. 135-145.

education and regular education. At the heart, Kears is truly on to something. The history of American public education is certainly rooted deeply, unavoidably, in efforts to distinguish the skills and backgrounds of students from each other. Kears cites Gelb's important article that examines the evolution of constructs of cognitive disability, and Kears then proceeds to draw an accurate picture of how public school systems have continued to classify and reclassify various students into labels and settings manifesting "definitional fluidities" and "borderlinities" up to this very day. Traditionally, special education has been seen as these efforts taking place on opposite, clearly marked ends of the cognitive and behavioral bell curves, with "regular education" focusing on those falling within the standard deviation. Kears challenges us to recast this along lines which others, especially those espousing the full inclusion movement, promote: it's *all* special education. The current popularity of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model comes much closer to demonstrating a more current "theory of progressive special education" than does the historical classificatory fluidity and borderlinity on which Kears focuses. This may be too Whig-ish a history, but perhaps the constant evolution of the classificatory schemes Kears discusses are finally coming to bear fruit that would nourish his thesis. At any rate, it is certainly worth talking about.



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