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# "A Narrower than Necessary Focus": Jason Ellis and Benjamin Kearl on Special Education History: A Multilogue Response to Benjamin Kelsey Kearl and Jason Ellis

Donald Warren

*Indiana University - Bloomington*, [dwarren@indiana.edu](mailto:dwarren@indiana.edu)

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## *Education's Histories*

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Notes

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### **"A Narrower than Necessary Focus": Jason Ellis and Benjamin Kearl on Special Education History: A Multilogue Response to Benjamin Kelsey Kearl and Jason Ellis**

*Donald Warren*

In his response to the Kearl examination of special education's early classification schemes, Jason Ellis solidifies his standing as a historian to watch for authoritative critical insights across several fields of inquiry. These include special education history, of course, and they reach farther afield into the broader precincts of education's histories, education research, and the history discipline generally. Ellis perforates multiple borders, leaking implications with abandon. On that point, his comments reinforce Kearl's findings and analysis but do so from a different angle.

He reminds readers of a vibrant new literature in special education history. It is more nuanced, sophisticated, and, he puts it, "historicized" than much previous work, although dispensable romantic versions continue to be published. He guides us through a sample of this fresh material, a highly beneficial service. For one, Ellis refers to doors opened by consultations with classroom teachers and their on-the-spot pedagogical creations. Through these and other sources, recent research underscores his argument that historical inquiry on special education remains unfinished business. We need to get the story right to root complex understandings of the field's ways and means and to trace their impact on policy over the years. Warning against a rush to theory, he wants to fend off the simplistic dichotomies of either/or interpretations of special education's past and worries that abstracted explanations will distract us from this essential task. His concern makes sense, given the knotted history still being untangled.

But here's the thing: in concluding the hard labor of historicizing, as he has ably and provocatively done, he knows its implications are two-way streets. Part of the special education problem has been that education's histories have blocked it in conceptually unjustified culs-de-sac. Whatever our concentrations, we historians need to find exits from the dead-ends. No empirical weight compels us to settle on "a narrower than necessary focus." Ellis demonstrates the opposite is the case. In effect, he presses us to do our jobs competently in light of the latest findings. That entails ongoing conceptual excavations, tossing nets repeatedly in search of possibly relevant sources and contexts, and letting the evidence lead us, ever alert for the siren misdirections of unexamined assumptions. One way to contemplate Ellis' comments is to see them as an outlined historiographical manual. He recognizes the deficiencies in this multilogue and his compelling 2013 *History of Education Quarterly* article.<sup>1</sup> I am not familiar with his paper, "The History of Education as 'Active History,'"<sup>2</sup> but the title alone makes me want to read it in anticipation of his forthcoming book. He makes a strong case for historical multitasking.

<sup>1</sup> 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 (November 2013): 401–29.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Ellis, "The History of Education As "Active History": A Cautionary Tale?," September, 24, 2012, <http://activehistory.ca/papers/history-papers-11/>; Jason Ellis, *Class by Themselves? Children, Youth, and Special Education in a North American City—Toronto, 1910-45* (forthcoming book).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

He and Kearsley rightly select the progressive education era as a prismatic topic potentially refracting light beyond itself onto special education, the history of education, history generally, and the intimately connected past of education research. There is much work to be done, including clear-eyed revisits to earlier contributions now suspected as incomplete if not false. Daniel T. Rodgers, for one, advocates a bigger canvas for a portrait that amends (or upends) national and continental foci.<sup>3</sup> Without referencing them, his analysis casts doubt on the utility and empirical basis of David Tyack's often cited categories of progressive education. Tyack wanted to differentiate among progressive "types," but Rodgers' global perspective captures progressivism as a safe haven for a colonialist mentality. He erases the irony from Tyack's identification of a one-best system of schooling, offering tragedy as a more descriptively accurate trope. Rodgers doesn't get the last word; he only frames questions historians of special education may find enticing.

I read Kearsley's two-part essay as an advance on the reconceptualization project, not a distraction from the historiographical work Ellis recommends. Grounded principally in philosophical sources and driven by their methods, Kearsley's theories are proposed as signposts for historical investigations.

They create spaces for Ellis' agenda.



*Education's Histories* would like to thank Donald Warren for his multilogue response to Benjamin Kelsey Kearl's essay, "Of Laggards and Morons: Definitional Fluidity, Borderlinity, and the Theory of Progressive Era Special Education (Parts 1 & 2)" and Jason Ellis's multilogue response, "The Theory of Special Education and the Necessity of Historicizing."



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Adrea Lawrence & Sara Clark, co-curators

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