
Presidential Address

LAGGARDS, MORONS, HUMAN CLINKERS, AND OTHER PECULIAR
KIDS: PROGRESSIVISM AND STUDENT DIFFERENCE IN SHAPING
PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Robert L. Osgood
Muskingum University

THE OFFICIAL “DISCOVERY” OF STUDENT DIFFERENCE

The year was 1909. The United States was in the throes of tremendous social and institutional changes: a rapidly diversifying population, dramatic shifts in political and economic structures, the rise of Progressivism as a paradigm for social reform and social control, and the intense and often grating sounds of a public education system really beginning to come into its own across the nation. During that year, Leonard P. Ayres and the Russell Sage Foundation published a book that fit the times perfectly. *Laggards in Our Schools: A Study of Retardation and Elimination in City School Systems* took a detailed and often harsh look at public school development in the United States, paying particular attention to the growing pains all bureaucratic systems face at some point and relying heavily on the use of basic but revelatory quantitative data and Progressivist perspectives to critique the efficiency of large urban school operations.

Ayres’ basic thesis was that for school systems to function efficiently, school officials had to acknowledge, confront, and address the fact that significant numbers of children were not attending, performing, or behaving in ways that contributed to effective school administration and operation. “Laggards” were the inevitable of consequence of *retardation*, a term that now is mostly associated with cognitive disability but at the time was applied to the practice of retaining students in the same grade level for a second—or even third—year. Ayres conveyed the consequences of this situation as follows:

To summarize then we may state our conclusions in four propositions:

1. Such figures as are available indicate that in our cities less than three-fourths of the children continue in attendances as much as three-fourths of the year.
2. Irregular attendance is accompanied by a lower percentage of promotions.
3. Low percentage of promotions is a potent factor in bringing about retardation.

3. Retardation results in elimination [dropping out].¹

Ayres also argued that

No standard which may be applied to a school system as a measure of accomplishment is more significant than that which tells us what proportion of the pupils who enter the first grade succeed in reaching the final grade. It is this that gives the problem of the elimination of pupils from school and the cognate matter of retardation their educational importance.²

At this point the question arises about what Ayres really saw as the “problem” or why he saw elimination and retardation as being of such utmost importance. Was it that schools weren’t functioning as efficiently or economically as was theoretically possible? Was it that society was losing out on potentially productive, contributory citizens because of school inefficiency? Was it that such children were not receiving the optimum education they deserved as students in the schools? Ayres’ book certainly addresses all three at various points, but the text gives the impression that this was a systemic concern first and foremost—that schools could be operating more efficiently and effectively but weren’t, and that this was a serious failure in terms of economic and bureaucratic functionality. In an era that demanded such close examinations of systems operations in businesses, factories, and yes, schools, these were damning accusations to say the least. At the end of the book Ayres notes that in terms of judging schools and school systems, “What is important is that the old criteria of ‘good’ and ‘poor’ and ‘striking’ and ‘appealing’ make way for quantitative standards of measure and comparison by which effectiveness and efficiency may be judged.”³ This statement represents social and bureaucratic progressivist thought to its core.

Yet even *Laggards in Our Schools* embodied some of the complexities and contradictions of progressivism as applied to educational theory, policy, and practice during the early 1900s. In the very next paragraph Ayres admits to “one more factor which, while of supreme importance, has only been casually touched upon in the present work. That is the psychological effect of retardation upon the retarded.”⁴ Indeed, the book’s last three paragraphs constitute an empathetic nod to the children who for most of the book had been reduced to mere numbers in the thirty-eight diagrams and 106

¹ Leonard P. Ayres, *Laggards in Our Schools: A Study of Retardation and Elimination in City School Systems* (New York, 1909), 140.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴ *Ibid.*

tables and charts scattered liberally throughout the text. Ayres laments the effects that the “habit of failure” caused by retardation and elimination: “Such a child is the one who is always ‘It’ in the competitive games of childhood... He always falls below; he falls down—he knows he is going to fall.” Drawing an interesting distinction between the large numbers of children in schools whom retardation and elimination affect and those labeled “defective,” Ayres insists that “They are not the mentally deficient, exceptionally dull children... [instead] these are the children that too many of our schools are confirming in the habit of failure.”⁵ In the language and assumptions of the time, these large numbers of children, unlike their obviously defective peers, could be “fixed” if school systems took the necessary bureaucratic and operational steps to reduce these problems.

To a historian this text and so many others like it from the Progressive Era are as confounding as they are content-rich. The complicated and at times seemingly mutually contradictory characteristics of “progressive education” have long interested me. How can an acknowledged paradigm widely considered to be, or at least often treated as, a single entity accommodate both the incessant demand for efficiently run school systems as well as a dedicated, determined view that within those systems the individual child’s needs and interests demand constant and authentic attention and nurturing—a practice that is virtually impossible to faithfully follow in a large, efficient bureaucracy dedicated to the education of masses of students of all ages and abilities? This conundrum persists despite the fact that “Progressive Education” has been examined by historians, philosophers, school officials, and social policy formulators for generations. Indeed, schools and school systems today demonstrate similar aspirations and continue to struggle mightily with accommodating both.

Laggards in Our Schools insisted that its focus was on the approximately one third of city school children who, while perhaps “a little behind physically, a little behind intellectually, and a little behind in the power to do,” still belonged in regular classrooms and could benefit from systemic reform.⁶ However, those children clearly so defective, deficient, feeble-minded, or crippled that to even try to include them in the regular classrooms discussed in the book was seen as useless. In short, those children who at the time were just beginning to populate “special classes” and other segregated, in-school settings in which they were intentionally isolated from “normal” students and “normal” school structures can also help us to examine this question. By 1909 several large urban school systems featured such settings; their number, and the number of students in them, would increase dramatically

⁵ Ibid., 220.

⁶ Ibid.

over the next 20 years, as would the kinds of disabilities identified and addressed within them.

With these structures emerged a language of relative school failure for school children. There was the “laggard,” the “backward child,” the “dullard,” children whose failure was a function of both personal and school-generated factors. There was also the “defective,” the “feeble-minded,” the “incorrigible”: children who found their way into the schools despite compulsory education laws that often attempted to proscribe their attendance at a regular school. A third grouping—the idiot, the helpless, the hopeless, the completely deaf and/or blind, whose disability supposedly prohibited attendance at any formal school setting outside of a residential institution either because it was assumed they couldn’t possibly learn at a regular public which had no way to even attempt to accommodate them—was relegated to settings outside the public school system, rendering them a concern of others, not of public school professionals.

BEYOND AYRES: OTHER VOICES, OTHER VIEWS

The labels used to identify and define children clearly established patterns, expectations, and strategies based on student difference in the schools. These differences over time became more apparent and more important as large school districts worked to create efficient mechanisms for instruction and administration. In reviewing this landscape, these labels and terms indicating significant differences among students’ abilities to conform to the expectations of school bureaucracy played a vital role in allowing the seemingly mutually exclusive goals of progressive education to coexist in both time and place.

One potentially productive way to explore this thesis is to look at the language used at the time to discuss these “peculiar” (a term used in Boston in the late 1800s) students who to many were noteworthy only because they were gumming up the public school machinery. Historical record reveals commentary from nationally recognized experts in education and medicine to teachers in local district classrooms. The range of terminology, assumptions, and sentiments was expansive to say the least.

Consider J. E. Wallace Wallin, who wrote one of the first and most widely read textbooks on teaching children with disabilities. In his text’s first edition, published in 1924, Wallin dismissed many of these children as “human clinkers and ballast driftwood” whose sole contribution to the public school setting was to make it vastly more difficult for teachers to teach and “normal” children to learn in regular classroom settings.⁷ James T. Byers, Secretary of the National Commission for Feeble-Minded, proclaimed to the Indiana State Teachers Association in 1917: “There are these children that do not get along,

⁷ J. E. Wallace Wallin, *The Education of Handicapped Children* (Boston, 1924), 92-93.

that are taking your time and your attention to an unlimited extent, taking it from the other children very largely. They are a drag upon you, a drag upon the class, and a drag upon the school, day after day and year after year.”⁸ George Bliss, a renowned administrator of residential institutions for the mentally disabled and a respected commentator on issues related to disability, wrote in 1920 that

we need a social conscience that will not tolerate feeble-minded children in the public schools, that will demand either their segregation in special classes, or their removal to a suitable institution... Defective children in the public schools are not only a burden to a conscientious teacher, but as they develop into puberty may be a positive menace to the discipline and morals of any schoolroom.⁹

Add to the mix the accepted medical and educational classificatory terminology of the time—“morons,” “imbeciles,” “dullards,” “subnormals,” “incorrigibles,” “feeble-minded,” “backward,” and yes, “laggards”—and one can sense the desire and perhaps even need to dehumanize these children so that their experiences could be comfortably subsumed to the demands of efficiency in school administration and justified as such to the public. In an era where disability and even backwardness within society was treated with contempt and suspicion—eugenics and social Darwinism certainly helped in this arena—such objectification and degradation could be readily defended.

Yet these contemptuous views represented only part of the story. Especially within the realm of public education itself, such views were shared, but also mediated, moderated, and even openly criticized. In 1908 E. R. Johnstone, Superintendent of the Vineland School for the Feeble-minded in New Jersey, declared in his presidential address to the National Education Association, “Public school men may say, ‘This is not our problem.’ To say this means nothing. The children are here; they are present in the public school in large numbers. They cannot be turned out. . . . The only thing to do is to give them the best care and training possible.”¹⁰ For many who worked with American school children on a daily basis, demeaning views of youthful fellow human beings resonated only partially, if at all. Boston school superintendent Stratton Brooks observed in his annual report from 1910 that public schools across the country faced compelling student differences in the areas of “mental alertness,” “moral responsibility,” “mental attitudes, tastes, and tendencies,”

⁸ James T. Byers, “Provision for the Feeble-Minded,” *Proceedings and Papers of the Indiana State Teachers Association*, 64th Annual Session, 1917, 169.

⁹ George Bliss, “President’s Address: The Need of a Better Social Conscience,” *Indiana Bulletin* 120 (March 1920), 26.

¹⁰ E.R. Johnstone, “President’s Address: The Functions of the Special Class,” *Addresses and Proceedings of the National Education Association*, 1908, 1115-1116.

and even “environment.” “In recent years,” he wrote, “the recognition that differences among school children has resulted in many modifications in education. Educators have endeavored to determine what differences exist and in what way the educational machinery needs to be modified in order best to promote the welfare of each individual pupil.”¹¹ As Brooks’ successor Franklin Dyer commented four years later, “To meet the needs of children who vary from the normal type is one of the leading purposes of our school system.”¹²

Missing from their comments are the pejorative, clinically acceptable terms for problematic children used so often by national commentators less familiar with the lives of children in schools. Ada Fitts, a special class administrator writing in the *Journal of Psycho-Asthenics* in 1920, evoked both efficiency and caring in her praise of special classes for “mentally defective” students: “The attitude of children entering the Special Classes is often sullen, resentful and discouraged. These children gradually become happy, helpful units in humanity’s whole. No miracle has been performed!” she proclaimed. The very name Special Class explains the reason for this seemingly miraculous change.”¹³

The teachers and observers who worked with “peculiar” and “laggard” children in the classroom often demonstrated even stronger sentiments celebrating marginalized students. As persons who had daily contact with children who were widely viewed with suspicion and contempt by the public, teachers were quite vocal in focusing on individual instruction and development rather than on system efficiency. Katrina Myers, the first special education teacher in Indianapolis, argued that “almost every child’s best is good in something, and it is only by our honest trying that we shall be able to draw a finer and better efficiency from the unused and often ill-directed capacities of children who possess limited possibilities.”¹⁴ A 1912 segregated classroom in Boston, according to an observer, featured learning activities that were

based entirely upon the pupil’s immediate experiences in and out of school, and special care is taken to suit that work to the child’s needs. The teacher holds the attention of the pupil and fixes the subject matter in the latter’s memory by use of concrete objects, by stories which illustrate the point, by

¹¹ Stratton Brooks, 29th *Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools*, School Document No. 10, 1910, 5.

¹² Franklin Dyer, 33rd *Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools*, School Document No. 11, 1914, 30.

¹³ Ada Fitts, “The Value of Special Classes for the Mentally Defective Pupils in the Public Schools,” *Journal of Psycho-Asthenics* 25 (1920/1921), 117.

¹⁴ Katrina Myers, “Feeble-Mindedness in the Public Schools,” *Indiana Bulletin* 100 (March 1915), 83.

comparisons and contrasts, and by much individual attention.¹⁵

In 1917 a teacher from Quincy, Illinois, wrote affectionately that “happiness is not only essential to the life of the child, but it improves his intelligence. Here in his own little world the backward child is given the opportunity of bringing out the best that is in him... This makes the work in the special setting interesting and enjoyable.”¹⁶ Back in Boston, a teacher in a segregated setting for older students commented,

In many such simple, homey ways the older pupils are as capable, if not more so, than the average normal girls of like age today. Perhaps their shortcomings are more noticeable but their abilities in certain lines can be relied upon more than those of their normal sisters. . . . The girls are learning to live and to help others to live honest, decent lives.¹⁷

For many teachers, their “morons” and “dullards” were real children with real needs, who deserved efforts to be treated with some dignity and educated with individual attention and care. Working with such children epitomized both the philosophy and the value of child centered instruction, even in school systems that featured tens of thousands of children with almost as many different needs and interests.

STUDENT DIFFERENCE AND 21ST CENTURY PUBLIC EDUCATION

These are just snapshots of the plethora of historical evidence and commentary revealing the astounding variety in language, tone, and emphasis that characterized public and professional views of diversity and difference in ability among schoolchildren and its impact on school administration in the United States in the early 1900s. It is now a century later, which begs the question: to what extent do such ambivalence, contrasting viewpoints, and competing agendas still exist in public education today? I’m tempted to argue that such things exist to a much greater extent than many are willing to admit. Despite decades of homage to the needs of children, to demands for demonstrable individual student achievement—indeed, to the ideal that there should be “no child left behind,” school systems, school professionals, the government, and the public still engage in policies and practices that downplay individual differences and stress the need for efficiency, economy, and simplification. We also still employ language that, while vastly different to our

¹⁵ *Annual Report of the Boston School Committee*, School Document No. 10, 1912, 28-29.

¹⁶ Anna M. Kordsiemon, “Construction Work—Its Value in the Subnormal School,” *Journal of the National Education Association* 2 (1917), 579.

¹⁷ “Report of the Director of Special Classes,” Appendix L to 38th *Annual Report of the*

ears, still connote the same themes and assumptions that led to the use of the terminology and labels of the early 1900s.

Take for example the now notorious No Child Left Behind Act. Its very title promises attention to every student, yet its implementation in my view has thoroughly buried considerations of students as viable human beings with genuine needs and interests of their own in favor of the systemic demands of accountability, responsibility and punishment—yes, punishment—of massive numbers of students, professionals, buildings, and districts. Beyond the standard litany of complaints about the law with which we are all now dolefully familiar, the fact that the standardized test scores supposedly designed to assess individual student academic achievement are used in mass aggregate to “assess” entire schools and school systems—and little else—suggests that the longstanding emphasis on administrative efficiency and operational convenience in schools has hardly dissipated and in fact may be more powerful than ever.

Another example, this from Ohio, is the current movement toward “value-added” assessments of schools—er, I mean, students. Briefly, value-added assessment seeks to ascertain truly *individual* student achievement in a given classroom over a limited period of time, in theory thus telling us not only how much a student has truly learned in a given classroom in a given year, but how much the teacher has “taught” her or him. I was confounded recently when I participated in a discussion with Ohio school administrators who, when discussing value-added assessment, never got past the point of explaining how their “quintile scores” would affect the district and building “report cards.” Again, a feature allegedly focusing on individual student needs somehow got sidetracked—*way* sidetracked—toward system operations and, as with value-added assessment, evaluations of teacher performance.¹⁸

Not to beat a rapidly dying horse, but a third realm in which these issues arise is in the continuing and highly complex world of special education, which itself exemplifies the characteristics and consequences of more general tracking in schools. Some of my research has suggested that the disagreements over the notions of “full inclusion,” “inclusion” and “continuum of services” is in many ways an extension of the age-old battle of student-centered practices vs. efficiency and convenience in school operations. Many see the inclusion wars as a test of our commitment to the rights of children and families; others see it as a naïve, impractical attempt to intentionally complicate the world of efficiency-minded school professionals who echo the sentiments of teachers

¹⁸ Thomas Misco, “Was That a Result of My Teaching? A Brief Exploration of Value-Added Assessment,” *The Clearing House* 82 (1), 2008, 11-14; Lynn Olsen, “‘Value-Added’ Models Gain in Popularity,” *Education Week* 24 (12), 2004, 1-15.

across historical eras: just remove the most problematic children from my classroom and let me do my job.

The recent rise of in popularity of RtI, or Response to Intervention, offers more evidence that many of the arguments about this topic from a century ago have yet to go away. The idea here is to view the classroom as a pyramid of intervention needs, with 80-85% of the children needing mild or no individualized interventions (Tier 1), 10- 15% requiring moderate forms of intervention (Tier 2), and a very few, less than 5%, requiring significant and intensive interventions to support their learning in the classroom (Tier 3).¹⁹ While the goal is to use this model to determine appropriate instructional activities that can allow all students to remain in the regular classroom setting, the conversation often turns to discussion of whether students in Tier 3, and even some in Tier 2, may require a continuum of services that happen to take place in another, typically segregated setting such as a resource room. At a recent conference I also heard several teachers refer to their “Tier 1 kids,” Tier 2 kids, and Tier 3 kids, as in “he’s a Tier 3 for sure.” Is this as damning as the commensurate levels of normal, moron, and imbecile, or regular, mild, and moderate? Perhaps not now, or not yet, but it is still seeing the child as an element in an impersonal structure rather than a unique individual with real needs.

What is certainly clear is that our societal and educational ability and propensity to differentiate among our children has increased considerably. The question is, to what end? Differences among school children are real, they are ubiquitous, and they deserve our attention if we truly care about each individual student. From Day One, humankind has been blessed with teachers and other educators who do care about each child, who work hard to help *all* students to learn, and who *truly* want to leave no child behind, or ignored, or sidetracked. However, the historical record and current practice suggest that the demands of massive and complex school systems—and I certainly do not deny that these demands are all too real and deserve our close attention—tend to take over as the size of schools and districts increase. For well over a century our nation has wrestled with these competing perspectives and agendas and many would argue that the system continues to win at the expense of the individual child.

PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY AND UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DIFFERENCE

So where does that leave us? I hope that as a decent historian and half-way decent philosopher I’ve done my job, that is, to leave all of us with more and better questions than answers and with ideas for further investigation and consideration. These might include:

¹⁹ Joseph C. Witt, Donna Gilbertson, and Amanda VanDerHeyden, “A Multi-year Evaluation of the Effects of a Response to Intervention (RTI) Model on Identification of

- What tools or perspectives of philosophical inquiry can help us resolve the demands for system efficiency in education—something always at the top of political and social agendas—with the notions of true child-centered education, something almost everyone still at least acknowledges as a desirable feature of our public schools? Using frameworks of Progressivism, being the amorphous blob that many see it as, can only help so far; are there other frameworks of points of view that can at least lead to these demands being realized in a more balanced fashion?
- Schools continue to try, at least to some extent, to employ both scientific positivism (in the form of standardized testing especially) and humanistic approaches to teaching and learning (in the form of mission statements and certain approaches to teaching content and managing student behavior). These make strange and uneasy bedfellows at best in the world of public schools in the United States, especially as they both attempt to address student difference. Can philosophical perspective and inquiry help us do a better job of this accommodation, or even moving beyond it?
- Should we reconsider the merits and drawbacks of Progressivism as a system of philosophical thought? We are certainly more capable of comparing it to other such systems in terms of its complexity and apparent inherent contradictions and conundrums. But it seems there is considerable room for continuing to examine and critique it as a key component of philosophical thought in the United States and as a manifestation (or not) of Pragmatism and other approaches to philosophical inquiry.
- Finally, we have not even begun to address the vast array of other aspects of student difference that play out in public education in the United States. Race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, socio-economic status, and other categories of difference clearly could—and should—shoulder their own similar historical explorations and philosophical critiques, much as has been done in the area of ability. Fortunately many of these are currently being tackled by other scholars and practitioners; we certainly can benefit from continuing these efforts.

At any rate, Leonard Ayres and his *Laggards in Our Schools* captured a host of issues that remain important to philosophers, historians, practitioners, and others invested in the education of our kids, peculiar and otherwise. In the century since its publication we have wrestled with his assumptions and recommendations as well as with the implications of his arguments. It is apparent we will continue to do so. I look to all of us who are familiar with and dedicated to this work to get us started on this long, arduous, but hopefully rewarding road.