

Book Review

A Class by Themselves?: The Origins of Special Education in Toronto and Beyond

Jason Ellis

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019.

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In this excellent analysis of special education in Toronto, Canada, from 1910 to 1945, Ellis concluded that no single straightforward story or overarching theory explains everything about this subject, which has always been the source of much debate. Policy makers, educators, and parents never had one cohesive goal, nor was there a consistent approach to special education, or what was originally called auxiliary education. Ellis asserts that neither “unimpeachable altruism” nor “malevolent and naked social control” (p. 203) characterized initial developments and that early influences still reverberate today.

The foundations of the auxiliary education movement were laid at the beginning of the 20th century as part of a large “wave” (p. 11) of social reforms in the 1910s. The Toronto Board of Education established its first auxiliary classes in the 1910-1911 school year. Ontario’s most ardent proponent of segregated arrangements for the “feeble-minded” was eugenicist Helen MacMurphy (Ellis elects not to sanitize the text of labels used commonly in the past—“mental defective,” “cripple,” and “moron”—even though they may be unsettling to readers). MacMurphy “believed that if an entire generation of feebleminds was permanently segregated, there would be such a drop in their numbers that soon we should be practically rid of this terrible problem” (as cited on p. 19). The recommendations of reformers and eugenicists prepared students “not for social integration and independence but for exclusion and dependency” (p. 51).

The trajectory of auxiliary education changed in the 1920s, primarily because of the adoption of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) testing and increasing faith in testers’ ability to determine children’s needs. The majority of experts gave up their nuanced appreciation of the many factors that had an impact on a child’s ability to succeed at school in favour of a simplistic reductionism. They believed that decisions about students’ innate, unalterable intellectual capacity could be determined by IQ scores. With individual potential circumscribed ostensibly by one’s IQ test result, policy makers phased out remedial classes for the “backward” and replaced them with practical training that would prepare students to take their preordained position “in a workforce supposedly defined by a hierarchy of intelligence” (p. 84).

By the late 1920s, many auxiliary class students were funneled into the newly created junior vocational schools for 13- to 16-year-olds. So-called “dull-normal” students, who were categorized as not well suited for the more rigorously academic technical schools, commercial schools, and collegiate institutes, also attended. The Ontario government had enacted legislation to combat truancy and keep students in school until age 16, and there were fewer jobs for adolescents in a

rapidly evolving economy. This new form of schooling was designed to address the resulting problem of high school overcrowding.

An important shift in perspective took place in the 1930s, and chapters four to six paint a somewhat more hopeful picture about society's attitude toward children who required additional supports in school. As awareness of the limitations inherent in their format and content grew, researchers and teachers began to challenge psychologists' reliance on IQ testing. Some educators even conceded that children with low general intelligence scores could excel in particular areas whereas children of average or superior intelligence could have a disability in just one area, known as a "special-subject disability" (p. 153). Educational experts began to believe that people with disabilities could "attain a level of normalcy" (p. 126) by overcoming their challenges through treatments and supports. Students were mostly expected to adapt to the world around them, but some progressive schools implemented innovations that adapted schools to students' needs, allowing those with certain disabilities to follow the standard curriculum. Changing attitudes and a renewed focus on remedial efforts prompted a shift away from the use of derogatory language in 1933 and a rebranding of the program as "opportunity classes" in 1937.

The decade of the 1930s was defined by the mental hygiene movement. Child guidance clinics focused on ensuring that children's future expectations were aligned with their abilities and limitations, and schooling became as much about "the healthy development of a child's personality," (p. 189) as it was about learning content. The country's need for labourers during World War II highlighted junior vocational school students' capabilities, surprising to some: many joined the workforce in productive capacities, and the ability of many girls studying in vocational schools to successfully contribute in childcare and domestic work impressed educators. Auxiliary education weathered the storms of the Depression and the war, demonstrating that it was not "a novel reform" but had become "an institutionalized feature of the school system" (p. 184).

In Appendix A, Ellis explained the approaches he employed to analyze Office Record Cards and Admission-Discharge-Promotion forms and to categorize factors such as parental employment and ethnic origin. He acknowledged his struggle to unearth accurate data for the period, and his need to work with small data sets. In fact, Ellis' remarkable effort to piece together conclusions with only limited reliable statistical data was one of the book's great merits. Ellis offered an explanation of the situations where insufficient data prevented the provision of a representative sample so readers can judge for themselves the validity of his conclusions. For example, he conjectured that the high number of Jewish girls discharged to vocational schools represented the "reconciling of traditional and emerging values" (p. 107): Jewish parents could educate their daughters beyond elementary school but in a safely gender-segregated environment that focused on domestic skills. Whenever his interpretations of the data were unavoidably tentative, as in this case, Ellis supported his conclusions with strong rationales and reference to secondary literature.

By examining the historical circumstances surrounding the early development of special education, Ellis aimed to shed light on contemporary discussions. He found evidence that modern debates were as relevant and controversial then as they are today. For example,

Should schools approach varying pupil abilities, capacities, and interests by differentiating the setting ... or should they adopt inclusive settings or a common curriculum, and leave it to teachers to differentiate instruction in mixed classrooms? ... Are disabilities deficits to treat, or differences to acknowledge or even celebrate? (p. 9)

Ellis explicitly targeted the book beyond historians to others “curious about how the past contributes to current debates on inclusion, educational equity, and special education policy” (p. 4); it would be even more valuable for lay readers if he had outlined precisely how approaching present debates armed with historical perspective could produce more productive conversations.

For example, although *A Class by Themselves?* is a timely and relevant piece of historical analysis about the systemic nature of white supremacy in education, Ellis did not comment directly on how the history of race and special education informs schools today. He demonstrated convincingly that because of its foundation in eugenics, racism has existed from the very beginning of the auxiliary education movement. Even as eugenicist thinking waned, however, notions of white superiority endured in discussions about IQ testing, with testers looking for proof of their strongly held prejudices. Testing experts failed to recognize that the content and format of the tests created special challenges for racialized students, due to language barriers and cultural differences. They also ignored the fact that their belief that racialized students were “innately intellectually inferior” (p. 55) became embedded in educational structures, which created systemic obstacles to student success. Even when the data did not support racist conclusions—for example, when representation of working-class immigrant children in auxiliary classes was virtually the same as their demographic proportion of the local population—the belief persisted that “differences in the intelligence of various racial, ethnic, and class groups ... were inherited and innate” (p. 83). Ellis noted that by the 1930s, scholars had debunked the idea that intelligence was tied directly to race. But, still, the conversation among educators changed only slightly, shifting to a “cultural deficiency theory” (p. 172) that continued to shape the negative assumptions experts made about non-white students. Even though direct commentary on the present was not Ellis’ objective, these observations are instructive today. They reveal, for just one case in point, how racism is inextricable from streaming in public education.

Ellis did not leave the reader without evidence of progress. In the 1970s, there was a move throughout North America toward mainstreaming, which reduced the number of fully segregated classes and integrated students into mainstream classrooms. In the 2000s, inclusion became the new holy grail of educational policy, with the goal of giving special education students full access to all the benefits afforded to students in mainstream classes. Ellis noted, however, that most teachers claimed that they were unsure how to put this important principle into practice, despite their notional support. Deliberations and policy decisions continue to revolve around inclusive education. Studies confirm, however, that racialized and working-class students continue to face an uphill battle with respect to prejudice in streaming decisions and in gaining access to high-quality education, as they did from 1910 to 1945.

A Class by Themselves? is a well-constructed, easy-to-read book. Ellis eruditely explored how changing views and deepening understandings of disabilities, learning problems, and pedagogical practices commingled with a complicated array of “educational, social, political, scientific, and individual human factors” (p. 211). He inspired the reader to contemplate a number of questions of great contemporary significance. Are 21st-century special education policies and practices more enlightened than the programs developed by the eugenicist founders of auxiliary education? Have we learned from the pitfalls of the past and implemented programs that are consistently in the best interests of all students in need of some form of special education? There has indeed been progress, but Ellis concluded that we have a long way to go before we can say such admirable goals have been achieved.

Reference

Ellis, J. (2019) *A class by themselves?: The origins of Special Education in Toronto and beyond*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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