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Fanny Isensee

“Recommended for Ungraded Class” – The Construction of Normalcy in Expert Reports in 1920s New York City

1 Introduction¹

Processes of sorting, allocating, and grading students have long been characteristic features of schooling. Although the rationales and supporting arguments for specific grouping decisions have changed over the course of time, the procedures themselves – albeit in different forms – have remained a key task of educational administration. With varying markers for sorting school children, e. g. age, gender, attainment levels, religious affiliation, the rationales as well as the instruments for dividing them into specific cohorts have changed. In this contribution expert reports used in school re-grouping projects represent the main source material. They allow to (re-)trace labelling processes, which attributed ‘retardation’ to certain children that were considered to deviate from the norm while also giving information on the construction of specific age norms and the criteria used to measure these. In this sense, pupils became more and more ‘measurable’ to the point where multiple standardized tests are utilized in an effort to map individual children as thoroughly as possible.

Informed by a material approach, this paper asks how and on which basis expert reports created by testing agencies define what is considered ‘normalcy’ and ‘retardation’. Since these reports were constructed and employed by actors involved in psychological research and educational administrations, their material aspects should also be taken into account, because understood as material actants (Latour 2012) they record and significantly shape the image of a ‘normal’ vs. a ‘retarded’ student by ascribing specific diagnoses and mental states, which found expression in the form of an assigned status.

In a first step, the contribution situates the psychological knowledge in the framework of a rising tide of intelligence testing and psychometric studies, before dis-

1 This contribution was inspired by materials and sources collected in the research project “The Bureaucratization of Groupings. Local and Transnational Dynamics of Innovation in the Introduction of Age-Graded School Classes in Compulsory Education (Prussia, the USA, and Spain, ca. 1830-1930)”. The author owes important input to Prof. Dr. Marcelo Caruso, Jona T. Garz and Daniel Töpfer, and to the archivists at New York City Municipal Archives.

cussing the materiality of psychological reports and framing them as *small forms*. As such, they encase and produce knowledge about the individuals they describe and record. The reports in question stem from an examination of pupils who stood out regarding the disparity between their achievement levels and grade levels. Secondly, the underlying conceptions about and connections between age, attainment level, and mental status are analyzed as they informed the construction of the psychological reports and the resulting interpretations. In the third part, these reports are utilized to investigate their role in creating and constructing (ab)normality pertaining to schoolchildren, which in this case study is framed in terms of ‘retardation’. The paper argues that the conceptualization of mental status, which relied on the calculation and evaluation of different ages and quotients, played a significant role in defining (ab)normality as a result of entangled age categories.

2 Intelligence Tests and Psychological Reports in New York City’s *Reclassification Projects*

2.1 The Production and Impact of Psychometric Knowledge

The parameters used by the testing and research authorities were based on psychometric knowledge whose production soared at the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing on the widely received and highly influential intelligence test developed by Alfred Binet (1857–1911) and Théodore Simon (1873–1961), US-American psychologists such as Henry H. Goddard (1866–1957) or Lewis M. Terman (1877–1956) altered and expanded the concepts of how to adequately test individual intelligence. The first to translate the Binet-Simon test into English in 1908 (Goddard 1908, 3–9), Goddard utilized intelligence testing to examine newly arrived immigrants at Ellis Island and founded the Psychological Research Laboratory located at the *Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Boys and Girls* in 1906, where Goddard’s version of the Binet-Simon test was implemented (Trent 1994, 158). Like other psychologists at the time, Lewis M. Terman was also fascinated by the intelligence test developed by his French colleagues. Terman’s revision of the Binet-Simon scale – also known as the Stanford-Binet Test –, developed at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education between 1911 and 1912 (Terman et al. 1917, 7–10), was widely received and forms the basis for intelligence tests still used in the USA to this day.

Compared to Binet and Simon, a key discrepancy in how many US-American psychologists like Goddard and Terman approached the concept of intelligence lies in the circumstance that they failed to adopt Binet and Simon’s classification of underperformance as a temporary issue and intelligence as a pliable concept. Instead, Terman, Goddard and many of their colleagues understood intelligence as a more essentialist, stable, and inherited trait that could not be altered through educational or psychological measures. Goddard’s views are illustrated, for example, in his study

on *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*, in which he follows the inheritance of mental traits throughout a family's genealogy to substantiate his arguments on 'feeble-mindedness' and his calls to restrict reproduction rights for individuals labelled as 'feeble-minded' (Goddard 1912).

Terman's work displays similar links to arguments claiming that intelligence is hereditary. He and his research team perpetuated the idea that “nature” played a more significant role compared to “nurture”: “practically all of the investigations which have been made of the influence of nature and nurture on mental performance agree in attributing far more to original endowment than to environment” (Terman 1916, 115). While Goddard was especially interested in examining individuals he assigned to the lower end of the intelligence spectrum, Terman held a specific fascination for exceptionally intelligent individuals that he examined throughout his life in studies on genius and gifted children. These examples serve as an illustration of how psychological conceptualizations of intelligence were linked to an interest in heredity and served as a basis for arguments supporting the eugenics movement at the turn of the twentieth century.²

2.2 Psychometric Knowledge, Educational Research, and School Organization

Psychometric knowledge and intelligence testing also found their way into schools and served as instruments to assess and shape school organization. In the following the case study of the so-called *Reclassification Projects* that were conducted in New York City in the 1920s illustrates the usage of intelligence testing and its impact on the administration of schools.

In 1914, the *Division of Reference and Research* was founded as part of New York City's Board of Education. Renamed *Bureau of Reference, Research and Statistics (BRRS)* in 1918, this administrative unit served as an institution that collected complaints and investigated matters brought to its attention by the Board of Education. One of its main occupations was the compilation and collection of educational data as well as the execution of educational research “for confirmation of existent tests or standards laid down by investigators, and [...] to discover new tests or standards” (New York City Board of Education 1914, 7–8). Already in the first year of its operation, the BRRS took into account the following two tendencies in education:

A second subject that is receiving much attention is the education of immigrants who do not speak English, and who in many cases can neither read nor write their own language. [...] A third topic to which extended reference is made in many of the school reports, is the care and instruction of special types of children who physically, mentally or morally are found to present a considerable divergence from those other children who may be graded in groups for instruction (New York City Board of Education 1914, 34).

2 For more details and reflections on the development of intelligence testing in the USA see e.g. Gould 1981, Trent 1994, Zenderland 1998.

It is at the intersection of these two areas where the Reclassification Projects come into play. Conducted by the BRRS, these projects examined groups of students at schools that performed low with regard to the promotion of their pupils.³ In the case of the specific study that this contribution focuses on, the principal of Public School 145 in Brooklyn addressed the BRRS asking for their evaluation and expertise. A conference meeting with the principal established that he requested the examination of 26 pupils grouped in the special adjustment class in his school. These special classes were introduced as a remedial measure to bring pupils up to grade standard and decrease the gap in their attainment levels “in an effort to affect an adjustment between school and child” (New York City Board of Education 1922, 103). For these children, group tests and individual psychological tests were conducted to determine their intellectual status and reorganize the class based on their test results and diagnoses. The report’s conclusion states that all of the examined pupils were facing problems to keep up in the grades that corresponded to their chronological ages. However, the authors of the report also note that “because of their chronological ages it seems undesirable to place them in the lower grades suited to their intellectual ability” (Reclassification Projects 1924, 2). This shows the constant gauging that occurred with respect to placing children in specific grades – age played a role, but abilities were factored in as well.

In general, the examiners point out that the group as a whole showed difficulty with reading and recommended “correction of poor reading habits” (ibid.). They further tested the group by recommending three pupils to be examined with Performance Tests and 13 pupils for examination by the Department of Ungraded Classes. Placing schoolchildren with performance difficulties in ungraded classes was a common method of handling so-called “defective pupils”. These special ungraded classes were introduced in New York City in 1900 (New York City Board of Education 1914, 50) and constitute an allocation procedure that can be observed throughout the country, with some range of variation depending on the different local or regional contexts (ibid., 52). In the case of the specific Reclassification Project that this article focuses on, only four female pupils could be placed in the ungraded class, although the recommendation in the individual reports called for a placement of more pupils. This partial placement was connected with the ungraded class not having any extra vacancies, especially for boys, at the time of reclassification. The communication included in the file indicates that as soon as the capacities of the ungraded class fall below 20 pupils, the boys will be placed in this group one by one. For the time being, they are to remain in the special adjustment class they were originally placed in. The pupils marked 3A or 3B in the special adjustment class were to be placed in the regular 3A or 3B classes. One male pupil was sent to the Probationary School (Reclassification Projects 1924, 3).

3 A more detailed contextualization of the connections between urbanity, immigration, and school performance in the case of New York City’s *Reclassification Projects* can, for example, be found in Isensee 2021.

The communication on the placement of the pupils is followed by reports on the examination of the special adjustment class, sorted by the three groups 4A, 3B, and 3A and a summary of the results of the individual psychological examinations of the different groups. The file for this specific school closes with the individual psychological examinations of the special adjustment class pupils. Interestingly, the file contains two reports from female pupils that attended a different school (Public School 28 in the borough of Manhattan). In these cases, it is unknown if the pupils had switched schools after the psychological examinations had been conducted or if their documents should have been included in a different file. In any case, the reports on individual psychological examination are of special interest for this contribution since they condense very detailed information about individuals on one page. The collected information is not only very detailed, but at the same time very general and abstract – which ultimately allows for a comparison at a glance.

This means that on the one hand, the numerical coordinates of every pupil who was individually examined were meticulously recorded in the form. Here, the results from the various group tests that were conducted, such as the Stanford-Binet Test, the National Intelligence Test, and the Stanford Achievement Test in reading, arithmetic, and dictation, were collected and form a set of figures attached to an individual.

Depending on the test, these pupils are attributed a plethora of ages and quotients – (different) mental age(s), reading age, intelligence quotients and educational quotients. These figures exhibit a broad range and even the same examined categories, such as that of mental age or IQ, can display different results depending on the kind of test that was conducted. The details seem to provide a highly individual configuration of numbers and test results. On the other hand, the detailed report of examination section as a pre-printed part of the form delivers a rather formulaic description of the conducted tests. Not only is the wording quite repetitive throughout the reports, but the recommendations are very similar and thus represent a stark contrast to the (seemingly) highly individual test scores. In many cases, the recommendations are divided into physical and educational aspects, usually pertaining to sight, hearing or speech corrections for the physical part and an assessment and prognosis of the individual pupil's abilities in the educational section. The majority of the reports also feature a passage recommending shop work for boys and hand work for girls. The generalizations found throughout the collection of reports can be attributed to the repetitiveness of the test items prescribed by the underlying test. Nonetheless, the highly individual numbers and figures listed in the top part of the report and the very similar examination details found in the bottom part of the pre-printed form create a noticeable juxtaposition. Drawing parallels to their findings relating to special education and the role of teacher statement forms, Koskela and Vehkalahti have suggested that this “standardisation of evaluation practices also led to the standardisation of prob-

lems” (Koskela & Vehkalahti 2017, 475). This observation can also be made in the psychological reports analyzed in this contribution as they come to more general and even somewhat standardized conclusions than what could be expected from the gathered individual numerical coordinates. In turn, this furthers the emergence of a clearly defined spectrum of examination results used in the reports.

In part, the formulaic impression given by the written reports can be attributed to the way these examinations were executed. The tests started with test items on the level of the basal age of the pupil. Here, the examiner described how the tested child coped with the test items and how they performed. The difficulty and complexity of the tasks was incrementally increased until the tested pupils could no longer answer the questions or fulfill the tasks. At this point the examiner ended the test and calculated the child’s mental age based on their test results and compared mental age to chronological age. The discrepancy between the different ages formed the basis of the examiner’s interpretation and recommendation. In the case of the Reclassification Projects, intelligence testing along with psychological reports produced expertise related to the alignment of pupils on an age scale that was tied to certain notions of ‘normalcy’. With their reports and verdicts, the examiners delivered knowledge about the test takers that informed and legitimized (re-)grouping decisions in schools. Since school administrators requested the tests and examinations as a guideline for allocating pupils, these reports were perceived as lending expert knowledge that went beyond the capacities of the school administration’s capabilities. Therefore, this expert knowledge was attributed to the examining entity, in this case the BRRS and its employees, already from the outset of the examination procedure when the principal contacted the bureau and requested testing of the school’s pupils.

3 Measuring Pupils – Psychological Expert Reports as *Small Forms*

Although they can record different structures, situations, objects of examination, and results, expert reports still serve a common function: They facilitate the basis for a specific action. Even though they do not necessarily produce general knowledge that can be used to implement rules or provisions, reports nonetheless enable the person or organization that commissioned them to make a decision which is tied to certain circumstances and a specific situation. Reports and expert evidence have been used in many fields ranging from medicine to construction work, and pedagogical and psychological settings have also seen a share of this form of recording and storing expertise. In these settings, reports are largely connected to psycho-pathological examination methods, such as intelligence tests (Geisthövel & Hess 2017, 18). In this contribution, I suggest that framing expert reports as small forms that serve a specific purpose in the field of education opens up new perspectives on the practices and routines that determined administrative and organizational decisions in schools.

First coined in the field of literary studies (Haug & Wachinger 1994), small forms generally denote short text types which can exhibit a broad range of narratives and styles. In literature, their scope can encompass short prose, proverbs or forms of digital communication, among others (Hilzinger 2002). In general, small forms are broadly defined and usually characterized in disassociation from large literary forms, such as the novel. Thus, they are not clearly construed as a specific genre, but rather represent a wide range of genre types that are subsumed under this category and their smallness can only be determined in relation to large forms (Jäger et al. 2021, 3). Moreover, a central feature of small forms is that they are commonly used in routinized, sometimes even daily, practices. These forms can also be identified in educational settings, where they accompany organizational and administrative practices. That is why this contribution argues that a variety of documents and materials found in the field of education – in this specific case study expert reports – can be categorized as small forms, especially with regard to their routinized usage and the variety of textual layouts, structures, and functions they represent. Framing them as such opens up the perspective of examining how they contribute to allocation and sorting processes and how reports are used to differentiate between ‘normalcy’ and ‘deviation’ in the specific setting of schooling.

Furthermore, small forms reduce the content they record to a minimum needed to indicate what is being recorded and stored for future reference. Processes of reduction entail a decrease in scope, breadth, and gravity; however, at the same time reduction can support features such as overview, concision, and density (ibid., 2–3). In the case of the examined psychological reports, they condense different spheres of knowledge, psychological, educational, and physical characteristics into a one-page fact sheet that provides an overview of the respective pupil’s attested mental coordinates and abilities.

Applied to educational contexts in general, small forms can range from index cards, files, blanks or pre-printed forms to expert reports. They are designed to facilitate the recording and ensuing assessment of the collected information. It can be observed that they contain a specific register directed towards a certain audience, which has an effect on their layout and design. When examining small forms more closely the mobility aspect of these forms also comes into play since this is what makes them useful during practices of recording and gathering information and also in later evaluation processes.

4 The Measurement and Construction of Age in Psychological Reports

Acts of measuring pupils generate a plethora of scalable data and qualitative information. From these measurements, age is constructed as an amalgamation of different markers used to determine a pupil’s position along a predetermined scale, which aligns developmental aspects with certain abilities and specific ages. By administering

multiple achievement tests, the examiner generates various age coordinates that are deemed to determine a pupil's 'mental status': mental, reading, arithmetic, and dictation ages are collected through various tests and examinations and are ultimately compared to a pupil's individual chronological age. The reports also factor in intelligence quotients (IQ) and education quotients (EQ) to deduce an interpretation of the examined child's mental status, which circle around a mild or more severe form of 'retardation'. These interpretations are codified as assessment categories that can range from 'dull normal', 'borderline', 'retardation' (stated in years and months) to 'seriously retarded'. In some cases, the examiner added further information to the interpretation, such as 'physical defects' or 'language difficulty' that make the pupil's status even more complex.

The schoolchildren in question were examined to determine which school organization decision – either placing them in an ungraded class, which was the case for most of the tested pupils, or having them remain in the grade they were assigned to at the moment of examination – should be made. To make this decision, the researchers in charge of conducting the study determined that group testing was insufficient and that further individual testing was needed. In the resulting psychological reports age is constructed based on a pupil's mental status which in turn is calculated by relying on a number of different ages and quotients. This means that chronological age does not represent the decisive descriptor attributed to a pupil in terms of school organization, but rather a multitude of coordinates are used to determine 'normalcy' or 'deviation'. 'Normalcy' is defined as a balanced chronological age-mental status ratio with the underlying assumption that this balance represents the ideal state of a pupil, in which educational demands and the child's status are aligned. This configuration of an alignment between educational demands and a matching status on the part of the pupil emerged from the methodical-technical knowledge introduced by the testing agencies. Chronological age is now utilized as a mathematical operator against which the pupil's performance and testing results are measured. Hence, chronological age remains a crucial category for the allocation of schoolchildren and now gains more influence as a category of assessment, which ultimately constructs (ab)normality – on both ends of the spectrum. If a pupil is too young or too old for their mental status, they are pathologized as deviating from the norm. To obtain these assessments, the examiner determined the measured data by administering various tests whose results were then recorded in the individual psychological reports. The specific form of the report served as a means to translate data collected for each individual pupil into more general and scientifically recognized categories, thus lending the examiner's evaluation validity. This shows that the collected coordinates and the assessments that were inferred on their basis were produced by involved actors as well as by the utilized small form itself. Placing special emphasis on these expert reports highlights how age as a defining category is fanned out into ages related to specific ability levels (reading age, arithmetic age,

dictation age etc.). With the underlying argument that discerning different ages from one another allows for more accurate measurements of pupils, psychologists could substantiate the usefulness of psychometric testing for allocation and other school organization decisions. Thus, the described examination and interpretation processes as well as the ramifications they produced not only consolidated age normalcy, but ultimately made this normalcy measurable.

5 Outlook and Conclusion – Small Forms in Education

By taking a closer look at administrative decisions in schools through the lens of psychological reports, this contribution argues that the utilization of expert reports brought along new indicators that impacted grouping practices. Pupils were now meticulously measured and examined and the results were arranged along a scale that depicted intelligence and mental status as key factors for determining who fell into the ‘normal’ category and who deviated from this construction of normalcy. In this context, intelligence tests developed and employed in the field of psychometrics gained wide reception and were increasingly regarded as the gold standard. High hopes were attributed to testing pupils: “With the derivation of scales for measuring the achievement of pupils, [...] it will be possible to test adequately the efficiency of a school or system of schools” (Monroe 1913, 570). This quote from Monroe’s *Cyclopedia of Education* (published in 5 volumes between 1911–1913) sums up the expectations that were attached to concepts of intelligence and intelligence testing at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century: Not only could individual pupils be assessed and their progress evaluated, but testing was deemed to reveal the efficiency of the entire school system. Intelligence testing produced a specific kind of knowledge that was further complemented by individual psychological reports and thus enriched a pupil’s individual assessment. In the examined case, I would argue that experts and the examinations they conducted were specifically requested to supplement and even complete the overall evaluation of a pupil, because the existing educational knowledge did not suffice to draw conclusions regarding organizational decisions. The expertise collected by the BRRS’s examiners did not refute the results of intelligence tests or override their results as Patrick Bühler (see chapter 5 in this volume) argues for the case of special classes in Basel at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rather, intelligence tests and psychometric expertise supplemented each other and formed a more exhaustive assessment of individual pupils. Compared to Eric J. Engstrom’s concept of intersectional experts (see chapter 4 in this volume), the case study presented in this contribution could be interpreted as spanning different domains, but not necessarily as intersectional. Though different domains and areas of expertise formed the final assessment of the examined pupil, the hierarchy of knowledge that informs administrative reactions and decisions

clearly expresses that decision makers attributed more of an impact to psychometric and psychological expertise. Educators and school officials specifically sought the methodical-technical knowledge produced by intelligence tests and psychological reports and favored their results over the teachers' or administrators' expertise. Yet interestingly enough, in some cases the recommendations could not be implemented due to organizational restraints such as full or overcrowded ungraded classes, which ultimately led to the existing school structure postponing or even overriding the experts' recommendations.

In this context, intelligence was operationalized through tests that were to determine normalcy and deviation on both ends of the spectrum in the form of precocity and retardation. Although precocity was also regarded as a mismatch between chronological age and mental age, in the case of children displaying a mental age that was more advanced compared to their chronological age, this form of non-alignment was glorified (Beauvais 2016, 305), while 'retardation' was characterized as far more problematic, also because it was attested much more often than giftedness or even genius.

Expert reports play a significant role in these processes: After the individual and group results were recorded, they were then aggregated and utilized in widely received statistical publications that produced assessments of a city's entire school system, such as Leonard P. Ayres' *Laggards in Our Schools* (1909) or *Pupils' Progress Through the Grades* (1922) published by the Board of Education of the City of New York. These studies used aggregated testing data to make school officials and policymakers aware of the condition of the public school system – and in this process supported the manifestation of 'retardation' as a significant issue of contemporary schooling, which in turn called for the re-organization of schools. To a large extent, these organizational and allocation decisions relied on expert reports that can be framed as small forms in the field of education. These forms – and in this case they are actual forms in the literal sense as they are designed as one-page report blanks that can be filled in with a typewriter – allow us to gain a glimpse into how specific individual data was collected and interpreted. At the same time, categorizing reports as small forms also opens up explorations of the knowledge produced by them, which was predetermined by underlying established notions of intelligence and mental status, thus reflecting on the category of the (ab)normal. Not only did they consolidate specific norms of normalcy attributed to a specific age and establish a scale of normalcy, but by recording deviations from the norm, the reports created pathologies for certain abilities such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. A further exploration of the role of reports in these processes could shed light on the early stages of pathologies connected to school subjects, which later lingered on in contemporary reflections on, for example, dyslexia or dyscalculia. The role of educational interpretations of the accumulated data and their consequences, e. g. expressed by the teaching profes-

sion and teacher trainers, still needs to be further reflected upon as the discourse is centered around arguments and explanations brought forward by psychologists and administrators. In any case, this contribution has not only used individual psychological reports to stress the usefulness of small forms as a way to complement already established and charted materials, but also showcased how the genre of small forms can be transported into the field of education and discussed their potential as highly productive sources.

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