

## IOE at 120: Seeking the best way to educate the 'whole child', 1922-1932

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By 1922, Prime Minister Lloyd George's declaration that the men would be coming home to a 'land fit for heroes' rang hollow. The initial euphoria that gripped the nation in the aftermath of the First World War quickly dissipated as the enormity of the destructive capacity of the war in human and economic terms was realised. Some 750,000 British men were killed or wounded, the number of widows rose to c1.6 million, and just over 730,000 children lost their fathers. Families suffered extreme poverty as unemployment averaged 64 percent.

Britain's relatively undereducated citizenry, in comparison with her European and International competitors, was seen as a growing liability in terms of the nation's financial health and the future of the empire. With the passing of the People's Representation Act in 1918 (and later the Reform Act in 1928), which extended franchise, the need for an educated citizenry became more imperative. To meet the demands of a new, modern world, the 1918 Education (Fisher) Act embodied the notion of creating a responsible and informed citizen. Though raising the school leaving age to 14 was achieved, the Act failed to meet its other targets when the Geddes 'axe' drastically reduced the education budget in 1922. The promised national system of education and

Labour's manifesto, *Secondary Education for All* (1922), which ostensibly aimed to create a new, fairer society, was severely compromised.

It was against this political and economic upheaval that T. Percy Nunn took over the principalship of the London Day Training College (LDTC) in 1922. He was closely involved with the Hadow Committees' investigations into the education of adolescents in 1926 and primary education in 1931. Nunn's reputation had been sealed with the publication of his book *Education: Its Data and First Principles* (1920) in which he attempted to steer education in a new direction. It became the prescribed text in teacher training and continues to remain influential today.

In *Education*, Nunn promoted idealist notions of freedom and individuality. Building on the educational philosophies of the first principal, John Adams, Nunn emphasised that the child should be seen as a whole person – body and mind – and not separate from their environment. His central premise was that whilst the purpose of education was to socialise the child, its true aim was to cultivate personal excellence and the teacher's role was to guide and encourage individuals to take responsibility for their own destinies. These ideas were popular among the progressive educationalists who promoted child-centred pedagogies. One difficulty, however, was that individual nature and ability varied. One solution was to apply the new scientific measures that were being used to quantify individual differences.

Wanting to establish educational research at the LDTC, Nunn appointed Cyril Burt in 1924. Burt, a disciple of Francis Galton, believed in the widely held eugenic view that intelligence was hereditary and fixed. His experience of adapting the Simon-Binet intelligence tests was brought to London when the London County Council (LCC) hired him in 1913 as the first educational psychologist in the country. Burt began testing children using his 'mental footrule' which he said was an accurate predictor of cognitive abilities. He believed that by the age of 11 the future potential of a child could be ascertained. Burt disregarded the child's environment, including their socio-economic background and other factors which could affect their development. The result was a tension between progressive child-centred theories and the fixity of intelligence being promoted by the new science. Burt's eugenic views and association with LDTC is something IOE has to live down. In the 1970s it was discovered that he falsified data to perpetuate his belief that intelligence was innate and fixed.

Debates on differentiation according to ability infused with ideas on intelligence eventually gained the support of the Hadow Committee, influencing the outcomes of the 1924 and 1926 reports on psychological testing and the education of adolescents. The reorganisation of schools which followed meant that children who failed the eleven plus examination for entry into the few fee-paying secondary school places were streamed by academic ability. The ablest were sent to central schools which provided technical and vocational training, implicitly suggesting that these schools were suitable for the working classes. Progressive education therefore became tied with the hierarchical education

system which also served to maintain the existing social order. The structure foreshadowed the tripartite system of the post-WWII period.

This period saw increasing numbers of doctoral students join the LDTC, helping to raise its research profile (the majority investigated intelligence under Burt's guidance). In 1927, the College was selected by the Colonial Office, over Oxford and Cambridge, to train teachers to work in parts of the empire. With its reputation at a peak, in 1932, the LDTC transitioned into becoming the newly established University of London Institute of Education. Sir T Percy Nunn became its first director. A new era had dawned.

### **Further reading**

Chitty, Clyde. *Eugenics, Race and Intelligence in Education*. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.

Lowe, Roy. *Schooling and Social Change Since 1760: Creating Inequalities Through Education*. London: Routledge, 2021.

**Image:** National Union of Teachers. *The Schools at Work: Being a Pictorial Survey of National Education in England and Wales*. London: Evans Brothers, 1930. IOE Library, History of Education Collection, HC1240.

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