

Some historical sources on intelligence testing, eugenics and children with special education needs

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I have been studying key texts on the history of schooling during the interwar period for my research. In this post, I highlight some of the sources from the late 19th century to the end of the period between the two wars that are relevant to the history of special education needs or, more precisely, the history of intelligence testing and eugenics and the exclusion of children with learning difficulties in state-funded schools. Many of the labels used to describe children with disabilities are offensive to us now and it is, therefore, important to consider the use of these within their historical context.



Sandlebridge Schools at Warford

The history of education is replete with references to mental health issues in the legislative acts and books dating from the first half of the 19th century to the recent past. The first piece of legislation that deals with the issue of provision “for the care, education and training of idiots and imbeciles” was the 1886 *Idiot's Act* of Parliament. It was the first time that the UK government had differentiated between those with mental health problems (‘lunatics’) and those who had learning disabilities (‘idiots’ and ‘imbeciles’). In 1908, the first facility that included children with special needs, and differentiated between the ‘mentally subnormal’ and the ‘mentally ill’, was Mary Dendy’s (1885-1933) Sandlebridge Colony in Great Warford, Cheshire. Dendy was a typical feminist educator who showed compassion and humanity but this was from the vantage of one who wanted to prevent the degradation of society. She was an advocate of Francis Galton’s (1822-1911) eugenic theories and her [address at the Galton Laboratory for](#)

[National Eugenics](#) in Manchester in 1902 confirms the similarities of her views with Francis Galton's. Galton (who was the half-cousin of Charles Darwin) had published his book *Hereditary Genius* in 1862 and by the early years of the 20th century had begun to question the 'civic worth' of the 'feeble-minded'. Dendy believed that the 'feeble-minded should be segregated in order that their deformities were not perpetuated through marriage into future generations – forced sterilisation was actively promoted by the [Eugenics Education Society](#) which many eminent educationalists of the day belonged to. In Dendy's opinion, the 'degenerate children' were incapable of being educated in the normal schoolroom and these children should be sent to special residential homes where they would be taught a livelihood to make them useful members of society. Her views are expressed in the 1911 publication [Schooling of the Feeble-minded Children](#). The debates about eugenics, social responsibility, ethics, religion or the 'biosocial' (genetic dispositions) aspect of race continued during the early part of the 20th century and several reports were published by the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded (set up in 1904) which culminated with the [1913 Mental Deficiency Act](#). This Act ensured the institutionalisation of the "feeble-minded' and "moral defectives" such that they were removed from the institutions established as part of the Poor Law – thus incorporating and advancing the ideas of the eugenicists. John and Samuel Wormald's [Guide to the Mental Deficiency Act, 1913: containing a legal and general exposition of the Act, with suggestions to the local authorities, managers and others for the organization and administration of the work dealing with the mentally defective](#) is in the IOE's special collections. The Wormalds, father and son, were active in the eugenics movement. John Wormald was a solicitor and for many years the Chairman of the Schools and the Special Schools, Boarding-out and Care Committees for the Mentally Defective in Leeds. The guide was written for those who are "actively concerned about the welfare of feeble-minded or defective persons":

Imprisoned in our jails, confined in our Industrial Schools and maintained in the wards of our Workhouses are a large number of people who ought not to be there at all, and who are too often only injured by their present treatment, which is both costly and ineffective....The new powers of guardianship will be welcomed by those who are familiar with after care work in connection with these children. Very often such children will never need institutional treatment if these powers be wisely exercised but they will need the guiding and protecting hand whose continued presence the Act makes possible. ... They will afford scope for the noblest exercise of the religious spirit, in training, tending and cheering lives, which at present are needlessly darkened, but which are capable of a real, though it may be a limited development; and are keenly sensitive to many simple joys of which they are now deprived (Wormald & Wormald, 1913, p. vii).

The above gives the impression of being quite caring but Wormald's son Samuel, a member of the Eugenics Society, later became the notorious Executive Officer of the Mental Deficiency Meanwood Park unit in Leeds. He is remembered today for his often ruthless removal of more than 2,000 people (children, unmarried mothers and factory workers) considered to have a disability from society because he believed that "...by being allowed to repeat their type, the feebleminded are increasing the ranks of the degenerate and wastrel classes with disastrous consequences to the entire community" ([Digital Archives of the Meanwood Park Hospital](#)).

George E. Shuttleworth, a pioneer psychologist and Medical Examiner for the School Board in London, and did much to promote an understanding of differences between the different types of children deemed to be 'subnormal'. It was through his persistent efforts that provision was made for children with disabilities. He devised teaching methods and set up "special" schools for children considered to have 'mental deficiencies'. His book, [Mentally Deficient Children](#) was the standard text on the subject and ran to five editions from 1895 to 1922. The [British Medical Journal](#) [suggested](#) that the book was so widely read that "there can be few psychiatrists throughout the civilised world to whom his name is not familiar".

In the preface to his book, Shuttleworth explains the various terms used to describe these 'feeble-minded' and 'backward' children suffering from 'retarded mental development'. Shuttleworth included in the 2nd edition of his book two additional chapters that give an account of an inquiry on the educational training of children with learning disabilities by a Committee under the Education Department of which he was a member. The School Board for London adopted the recommendations for practical measures proposed by the Committee as did several other school authorities. His advice was that the "*mentally-feeble child is specially incapable of comprehending abstractions: all instructions, therefore, must be presented in a concrete form, which it can not only see, but when possible grasp in the hand as well as in the mind*" (p. 100). Shuttleworth's papers are held at the [Wellcome Library](#).

Schooling children with special education needs was also considered by educationalists and psychologists on the Continent. In the early part of the 20th century, the French psychologist [Alfred Binet \(1857-1911\)](#) had been commissioned by his government to find a way to measure intelligence as a way to find out which children needed additional assistance. His theories, and those of his collaborator Dr. Theodore Simon, are included in [The Intelligence of the Feeble-minded](#) which was translated into English and published in 1916. In this book, we get a glimpse of Binet's discoveries which he obtained by observing children. Binet and Simon developed the Intelligence Quotients or IQ tests to determine the mental age and ratio of a child's intelligence. These tests were also used to gauge the intelligence of the men recruited to fight in the First World War. Later in the mid-1920s, ratios for each group of 'mental defectives' were set out – idiots had an

'Intelligence Quotient' or IQ of under 20, imbeciles were those with a mental ratio of between 20 and 40 and feeble-minded were those that had a ratio of up to 60 – these were published in the *British Journal of Psychology* (July 1926, pp. 20-53).

Other relevant books in the Special Collections include the [Feeble-mindedness in Children of School Age](#) by C. Paget Lapage published in 1911. Lapage was a medical doctor at the Children's Hospital in Manchester and a lecturer in School Hygiene at Manchester University. His book was aimed at school medical officers, teachers, and social workers who deal with feeble-minded children. In Lapage's view, effective methods of dealing with the feeble-minded were of immense importance to the national welfare of the community as "feeble-mindedness is an inherited taint handed on from generation to generation, and that every feeble-minded person, who is a free and unrestrained agent, may, by becoming a parent, transmit and taint and so affect tens or hundreds of future generations" (p. viii).

[The Education of Mentally Defective Children: Psychological observations and practical suggestions](#) by Alice Descoeudres (translated from French into English by Ernest F. Row) was published in 1928. In the previous year, an amendment to the Mental Deficiency Act enabled those who had mental health problems through illness or accident to be included in the group that could be supported in specialist institutions. The book acknowledges the difficulties of working with 'defective children' stating that "WE have to contrive in a variety of ways to arouse their [these children's] interest, to awaken and hold their attention, or develop their will power, to gain their confidence, and to strengthen their characters" (p. 7).



Cyril Burt (1883-1971)

Lastly, no list on this subject would be complete without reference to the work of Cyril Burt who influenced the structure of the schooling system in the interwar years with his work on psychometrics or the science of measuring mental capabilities. Burt was the first part-time school educational psychologist to be appointed by the London County Council (LCC) in 1913. From 1924, he was a part-time lecturer at the London Day Training College (which became the Institute of Education in 1932) and in 1931 Burt was appointed to the Chair of the Psychology Department at UCL, taking over the position from Charles Spearman. Burt had been introduced to Galton's work at an early age and developed mental testing in schools in 1909 whilst working as Lecturer in Psychology and Assistant Lecturer in Physiology at

Liverpool University. This work continued whilst he was at the IOE and at UCL. His belief that the innate intelligence of children could be measured to judge their capabilities is demonstrated in the book [*Mental and Scholastic Tests*](#) published in 1921. His initial report for the LCC on [*The Backward Child*](#) was published in 1923 but the most influential work was his [*The Young Delinquent*](#) (1925) which established the acceptance of psychometrics and its hegemony for pedagogy for the future decades. Evidence of his thinking is presented in [*The Subnormal Mind*](#) which was published in 1935.

The above sources are examples that illustrate that eugenics was prevalent and permeated educational thinking in the early 20th century. The marginalisation of children continued in the interwar years (albeit in a less draconian manner) for if children did not fit the norm in terms of their mental or physical capabilities, they were segregated in the schools or excluded altogether.

If you would like to view any of the texts mentioned above, please contact us when the libraries open.