

Leta Stetter Hollingworth and the Speyer School, 1935-1940: Historical Roots of the Contradictions in Progressive Education for Gifted Children

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Leta Stetter Hollingworth, a pioneer of gifted education in America, embodies the dichotomy between the ideals of progressive education and the measurement movement prevalent at the beginning of this century, the movement most closely associated with the identification of gifted and talented students. The Speyer School experiment illustrated how the measurement paradigm could dominate a very democratic model of elementary education for exceptional children. There are vestiges of the strictly "objective" measurement paradigm in the identification of students for gifted programs today, juxtaposed with a very democratic paradigm in curriculum and teaching in those same programs. This article briefly documents that dichotomy, and uses the lens of some of Dewey's writing to analyze how it was articulated at the Speyer School, PS 500 in New York City between 1935 and 1940 by Hollingworth and her colleagues. This historical study will illuminate the roots of inconsistencies that have troubled reflective educators of gifted and talented students for much of this century.

The Person

Leta Stetter Hollingworth, who was a professor of educational psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University from 1916 until her death in 1939, was responsible for overseeing the program for rapid learners at the Speyer School from 1935 until her untimely death in 1939. An active member of the Women's Suffrage Party, Hollingworth was a champion of women's rights and a published author on the psychology of women. She was also the author of the first comprehensive textbook on the psychology and education of gifted children, *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture*, in 1926.

Born Leta Ann Stetter on May 25, 1886 in what is now Chadron, Nebraska, Hollingworth is primarily remembered as an astute researcher whose goal was social reform effected through change based on scientific study and data.¹ She spent most of her career advocating for women's rights at a time when it was widely believed that women were less

intelligent than men and that women suffered from monthly incapacitation as a result of menstruation. In fact, the goal of her doctoral dissertation was the scientific investigation of the validity of the theory of "functional periodicity," a theory held by her dissertation sponsor, E. L. Thorndike. Though the idea that women were intellectually equal to men was in strong opposition to views held by men like Thorndike and Terman, Hollingworth shared their belief in the utility of the IQ test in predicting future success in life. She also advocated forms of selective breeding as a means of improving social conditions and the human race.² Though she believed that women were capable of high intellectual ability as measured by IQ tests, Hollingworth continued to place them in a primarily procreative role, positing that women who had high IQ children should be paid by the government to have more children.³

The eugenic ideas of Hollingworth and other founders of the field of gifted education have not been perpetuated by that field, but the idea that gifted children should be taught according to their needs and interests has persisted to the present, along with the accompanying assumption that if gifted children are taught in the appropriate manner, they will achieve eminence—or at least outperform their peers of more average intelligence. To achieve those goals, Hollingworth chose democratic principles and progressive theory to undergird curriculum and instruction for her section of the Speyer School, the classes that were called the "Terman classes."

The Speyer School

The Speyer School at PS 500 on 126th Street in Manhattan was established in January of 1936 as the Public School Experiment with Mental Deviates.⁴ The school was to be the site of an experimental program for exceptional children, whom the New York City Board of Education called "slow" and "rapid" learners, with slow learners defined as children with IQ's of 75 to 90, and rapid learners, children whose IQ's ranged from 130 to 200. This range was later

cited as being flexible, since three children with IQ's lower than 130 were accepted for what were also called the Terman classes because they had exceptional talent in the arts, manual construction, and schematic design.⁵ Both groups of exceptional children were believed to be floundering in traditional classrooms and were considered to be maladjusted and truant. The experiment was later described as a testing ground for methods that were appropriate for these groups, particularly in order to cut down on truancy.⁶

The basis for the organization of the Speyer School presents the first and most conspicuous aspect of the dichotomy mentioned earlier: the fact that IQ tests were to select and classify the students. Though the explicit and implicit curricula of the school attempted to be progressive in nature, the premise on which the school was built was not. Dewey pointed out the uselessness of IQ testing in progressive environments, stating in an address to the Progressive Education Association in 1928:

It would not be hard to show that the need for classification underlies the importance of testing for IQ's. The aim is to establish a norm. The norm, omitting statistical refinements, is essentially an average found by taking a sufficiently large number of persons. When this average is found, any given child can be rated. He comes up to it, falls below it, or exceeds it, by an assignable quantity. Thus the application makes possible a more precise classification than did older methods which were by comparison hit and miss. But what has this to do with schools where individuality is a primary object of consideration, and wherein the so-called "class" becomes a grouping for social purposes and wherein diversity of ability and experience rather than uniformity is prized?⁷

Despite the use of IQ testing to determine eligibility for the programs, Leta Hollingworth did not follow some of the racist and sexist tenets of the prominent figures in the scientific measurement movement. Aligning with Dewey's idea of grouping for social purposes, Hollingworth attempted to reflect the economic, ethnic and racial diversity of New York City in the Terman classes, in opposition to the prevalent belief that children from immigrant and other groups had low IQ's. Though Terman, himself, had written, "the immigrants who have recently come to us in such large numbers from Southern and Eastern Europe are distinctly inferior mentally to Nordic and Alpine strains we received from Scandinavia, Germany, Great Britain, and France,"⁸ Hollingworth decided to include these immigrants in order to replicate what Dewey called the "typical conditions of social life"⁹ in New York City during the Depression.

In preparation for the opening of the school, Leta Hollingworth tested and interviewed hundreds of applicants to the Speyer School. Realizing that she was not reaching

some of the racial and ethnic groups of the city, among whom she was sure that high IQ children existed, Hollingworth decided to visit schools in poor and immigrant sections of New York to solicit teacher recommendations of outstanding pupils and the names of the youngest children in grades two to five. Once she had identified students in this manner, Hollingworth interviewed and tested each one. She visited the homes of the eligible children to explain the Speyer School program to their parents, but found that there was a marked reluctance among some racial and ethnic groups to place their children in a new or experimental situation, especially if it was out of the neighborhood. As the Board of Education reported,

The success with which she was able to overcome opposition is shown by the following list of nationality or racial groups represented in the rapid learner classes at the Speyer School:

American Negro	Hungarian
Austrian	Irish
British West Indian	Italian
Czecho-Slovakian	Japanese
Chinese	Mexican
Danish	Polish
Dutch	Rumanian
English	Russian
French	Scotch
German	Spanish
Greek	Swedish
Haitian ¹⁰	

Fifty students from the five boroughs of New York were admitted to the Terman classes. Hollingworth had assembled two racially integrated classes at a time when segregation was the norm. In addition, she identified 25 boys and 25 girls, giving half of the school's slots to girls at a time when it was widely believed that boys had the inherent ability to be more gifted than girls.¹¹ However, there is no evidence that a similar effort was made in the slow learner classes, which appear to have been filled with children from the surrounding Harlem neighborhood.

The Speyer School's plan called for the program to last until each child's thirteenth birthday or the closing of the school. This was a finite project, which was slated to end in February of 1941. The Speyer School program was supervised and planned by Paul Mort, William Featherstone, Leta Hollingworth, and Arthur I. Gates of Teachers College along with the superintendent of the Schools of the City of New York, Harold Campbell. Hollingworth's work with the rapid learners was completed by Herbert Bruner after her death in 1939. Gates and Featherstone advised the slow learner program.

The planners and participants developed a school philosophy reflecting a progressive point of view. They summarized the philosophy in the following two statements:

1. It is the duty of the school to cultivate all those traits which are held to be desirable in any member of a democratic society, irrespective of the individual level of intelligence.
2. The school is the most strategic social agency in the community and that its task is to take all children *as they are* and educate them for life *as it is*. The best interests, needs, and experiences of each pupil must determine the program of education if it is to be a satisfactory one.¹²

This philosophy statement, when compared to Dewey's *Pedagogic Creed*,¹³ written before the widespread use of IQ tests, parallels Dewey's point of view in its expression of belief in the uniqueness of each child and the founding of the curriculum on the observed needs, experiences and interests of the children in its view of the school as central in sustaining and improving society. In his 1928 speech to the Progressive Education Association, Dewey reiterated that the progressives had contributed to reform in education through, "respect for individual capacities, interests and experience; enough external freedom and informality at least to enable teachers to become acquainted with children as they really are; respect for self-initiated and self-conducted learning; respect for activity as the stimulus and centre of learning; and perhaps above all belief in social contact, communication, and cooperation upon a normal human plane as all-enveloping medium."¹⁴ The Speyer School curriculum reflected these principles.

The Rapid Learner Classes

Collaboration and the social construction of meaning were significant features of the curriculum units in both the rapid and slow learner classes at the Speyer School. Discussions were held in order to make important decisions on content and scope and sequence, and with the specific purpose of the children sharing what they had learned. They also centered the enrichment curricula around the social theme of the interdependence of humankind.¹⁵ These features reflected Dewey's teaching as a method for social change. He advocated choosing curriculum topics and direction by observing and studying the interests of the children over time. The teachers and children in the Speyer School stayed together for the five years of the experiment and knew each other well enough to engage in a dialogue that allowed the teachers to guide the curriculum along with the children. Dewey had envisioned this role of the teacher as a guiding expert, but equal member of the group.

...the teacher, as the member of the group having the riper and fuller experience and the greater insight into the possibilities of continuous development found in any suggested project, has not only the right but the duty to suggest lines of activity, and to show that there need not be any fear of adult imposition provided the teacher knows the children well as subjects, their import is not exhausted in bringing out this fact.¹⁶

The teacher in each Speyer School class was indeed a member of the group, and she sometimes allowed the children to choose the course that the unit would take. This example from the unit, *Aviation*, demonstrates Dewey's notion of the guiding teacher in describing how that unit was developed:

Several open discussions were held following our visit to the airport so that all of the children would receive the benefit of what each individual had obtained from the motion picture and the trip. The children were then divided into four groups to determine the scope of the study and the manner of attacking the same. The teacher was asked for her opinion and, having in mind the children's interest in the aviation of today, suggested that they work from the present to the past. However, this suggestion was carefully and graciously voted down. The children felt that since they had seen a good picture on modern aviation and spent a full day at the airport where modern trends in aviation were explained to them, they were ready to spend some time in tracing aviation from its early beginnings and working up to the present.¹⁷

The students in the slow learner classes also were involved in the curriculum decision-making, again illustrating the contradictions inherent in the design and implementation of the school. In an analysis of the Speyer School, Kleinman noted that:

Despite fundamental differences in approach and expectation toward the two groups, Speyer School educators were able to incorporate certain aspects of progressive educational theory. Using Dewey's theories of an experientially based, child-centered approach to education, for example, staff and administration designed integrated curriculum for both types of learners. In both cases, they involved the child in the planning and organizing of curriculum, experiences that, they believed, empowered children, giving them a greater sense of self-determination and responsibility.¹⁸

The Curriculum Units

Though there are only five rapid learner units that have survived since the Speyer School closed, Hollingworth cited 14 in her writing on the subject. All revolved around the overall theme, *The Evolution of Common Things*. Like

Dewey, Hollingworth believed that children should study topics that came from their everyday lives and that history should be "treated from a social standpoint; as manifesting the agencies which have influenced social development and as presenting typical institutions in which social life has expressed itself."¹⁹ The typical institutions that the teachers of the rapid learner classes at the Speyer School chose were *Aviation, Illumination, Transportation by Land, Transportation by Water, and Shelter*.

The contrast between the rapid learner and slow learner units also illustrates the discrepancy between progressive ideals and the enacted curriculum at the Speyer School. The slow learners at Speyer School were not expected to achieve a very high status in life. Their curriculum topics consisted of institutions within their immediate experience with little emphasis on historical and social aspects beyond their basic needs. They focused on institutions such as banks, the post office, public utilities and other areas that were thought to be central in their everyday lives. In this regard, Kleinman observed:

Although she would assert that it was tolerance for each other, attitudes of superiority based on IQ led to assumptions about the slow learners' abilities and came into direct conflict with the progressive belief that each child should be viewed as an individual. For the gifted, Hollingworth instituted debate as part of the curriculum because she believed it would teach, together with language, logic, and critical thinking skills, ways to argue constructively. For the slow learners, whom she and others believed incapable of critical thinking skills, debate was not taught.²⁰

It should be noted that Hollingworth was not responsible for the curriculum of the slow learners and may not have had any control over that curriculum. However, she did strongly influence the curriculum for the rapid learners and insisted that they be given instruction in French because it was assumed that they would go to college, where a foreign language was a requirement for admission. The slow learners were not afforded this opportunity on the assumption that they did not need it. Decisions and practices such as this stood in direct contrast to Dewey's conception of education. On this subject, he wrote, "It is an absolute impossibility to educate the child for any fixed station in life. So far as education is conducted unconsciously or consciously on this basis, it results in fitting the future citizen to no station in life, but makes him a drone, as hanger-on, or an actual retarding influence in the onward movement."²¹

As if in contradiction, the enrichment units for the rapid learners serve as exemplars of what Dewey viewed as progressive teachers' greatest possible contribution to

education, and indeed, their responsibility: organized bodies of knowledge with

a listing of sources from which additional information of the same sort can be secured. If it is asked how the presentation of such bodies of knowledge would differ from the standardized texts of traditional schools, the answer is easy. In the first place, the material would be associated with and derived from occupational activities or prolonged courses of action undertaken by the pupils themselves. In the second place, the material presented would not be something to be literally followed by other teachers and students, but would be indications of the intellectual possibilities of this and that course of activity—statements on the basis of carefully directed and observed experience of the questions that have arisen in connection with them and of the kind of information found in answering them, and of where the knowledge can be had. The presentation of material of this kind would liberate and direct the activities of any teacher in dealing with the distinctive emergencies and needs that would arise in re-undertaking the same general type of project.²²

After a brief history of the development of the unit, each of the rapid learner units of the Speyer School consists primarily of a historical time line of the central topic, with an emphasis on human interdependence and experience. This is how the explicit curriculum emphasized the development of social consciousness and a commitment to social responsibility in the children. No matter what the subject matter of the units or the type of class, all were taught, in keeping with Dewey's moral principles of education, "in such a way as to bring out and make focal their social and personal aspects, stressing how human beings are affected by them, pointing up the responsibilities that flow from their interrelatedness."²³

One of the major purposes of the curriculum for the rapid learners at the Speyer School was that it help the students to develop and use their intelligence and act as active, conscious agents for social improvement. Like other proponents of eugenics of the time, Hollingworth believed that gifted children should be encouraged to use their abilities for improving society, and the curricula were designed with that goal in mind. She wrote, "The child should have brought to his attention whatever will help him to understand his world, and to render to others the maximum service of which he is capable."²⁴ To this end, the students in the Terman classes were provided with many opportunities to interact in socially meaningful ways. In keeping with Dewey's idea of educating citizens for a democracy, "the curriculum was designed to give multiple social experiences both in the art of leadership and in the art of fellowship or 'followership'.²⁵

The School Environment

A major finding of the rapid learner experiment and later follow-up studies was that the students developed a sensitivity to their economic, racial and ethnic differences by being placed together in the same classes. They were a culturally and economically diverse group at Hollingworth's insistence, which paid off in social awareness on the part of the students and in unique connections in the curriculum. Bruner wrote in the final report,

While the group was relatively selective in respect to the factor of abstract or general intelligence, its members represented a wide diversity of background in cultural, economic, and parental occupation level. Many of the economic problems which existed only in theory for the more-favored minority were all too realistic for others...Through living and working together...the children came to identify the problems confronting their classmates as problems of real concern to them also. In addition to the factor of increased familiarity which resulted from a growing awareness of sympathetic interest and understanding on the part of both teacher and children, the very nature of the enrichment units on the Evolution of Shelter and the Evolution of Trade and Money, were anxious to volunteer information on the problems inherent in their situation. All the learners gained first-hand knowledge of the housing conditions in the slum areas for they not only heard about them from their classmates, but in several instances, visited the homes of these classmates who lived in the slum areas. The same was also true of the problems confronting minority racial groups; for many of their closest companions were members of such groups.²⁶

Thus Hollingworth, in her decision to have the rapid learner classes at the Speyer School reflect the cultural, racial and ethnic diversity of the city, created an implicit curriculum that helped to shape the children's experiences to foster deep understanding of social problems and issues of the day, not only in the immediate environment, but globally as well. The Speyer School rapid learners were encouraged to develop a sense of social agency throughout the curriculum and the school context. Since Featherstone did not make a similar effort to assemble a culturally diverse group in the slow learner classes, the same may not be assumed from their experience.

The rapid learners were supposed to develop a respect for individual differences through their interactions with the slow learners in the school, and there were many activities designed for both groups. Bruner reported that the organization of the Speyer School presented a serious challenge to the staff "to prove whether any curriculum that might emerge or be developed could bring out in its pupils those qualities of respect and tolerance which are basic in a democracy."

He wrote, "Many opportunities were present for both cooperative sharing of activities and for participation in leadership between the two groups."²⁷ Aside from the usual school contact on the playground, at lunch, in special assemblies, and in gym class, students from all classes served on the students council, worked on the school newspaper together, and shared a girl scout troop and boys basketball teams. In the school's final report, Bruner lamented the difficulty in extending these relationships to class-related activities, but attributed it more to "organizational and structural" factors than to social ones, inadvertently pointing out the contradictions involved in the basic format of the school. To further complicate the contradictions and to parallel much current research, Bruner concluded that the social interactions notwithstanding, the attitude of the classroom teacher was a key factor in determining whether a curriculum was successful and whether the students were respectful and caring for one another or intolerant and lacking in respect for the worth of each individual.

This story also illustrates how the beliefs of the planners of an educational program influence the outcomes. One can only wonder what the findings would have been if Featherstone had assembled as diverse a group as Hollingworth. One can also only wonder whether Leta Hollingworth would have maintained her deep commitment to mental measurement and eugenics as answers to the problems of educating a diverse population and the problems of society if she had lived to see the atrocities of the Nazi era. In addition to her part in forming the legacy of mental measurement, Hollingworth was largely responsible for creating a legacy of racial and ethnic equality and inclusiveness in identification and selection for gifted programs, a commitment to the development of social consciousness through the curriculum, and progressive educational ideals for the field of gifted education, thus helping to build a foundation based on contradictions for that field. She and others involved in the education of gifted children, especially with today's emphasis on their education in the context of all children, would do well to heed Dewey's cautions regarding combining scientific mental measurement with progressive educational ideals.

Moreover, even if it is true that everything which exists could be measured—if only we knew how—that which does *not* exist cannot be measured. And it is no paradox to say that the teacher is deeply concerned with what does not exist. For a progressive school is primarily concerned with growth, with a moving and changing process, with *transforming* existing capacities and experiences; what already exists by way of native endowment and past achievement is subordinate to what it may become. Possibilities are more important than what already

exists, and knowledge of the latter counts only in its bearing upon possibilities. The place of measurement of achievement as a theory of education is very different in a static educational system from one that is dynamic, or in which the ongoing process of growing is the important thing.²⁸

Notes

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