

Gifted Education in Houston, Texas: Curriculum Differentiation in the Early Twentieth Century

Mindy Spearman
Clemson University

During the first part of the twentieth century, the concept of giftedness was inexorably bound with the psychometric tradition. Psychologists who studied academically talented students used intelligence theory as a framework for practice, policy and research. Thus, the history of gifted education in America often is equated with the history of the intelligence movement—e.g. Alfred Binet, Henry Goddard and Lewis Terman (Hildenbrand 1981, p. 1). Much of the literature that deals with early gifted education chronicles the conception of psychometrics and the ideological battles waged in the years following the advent of gifted education in America. As a result, scholars have given great focus to a small number of events, sometimes even in a “top ten list” format (Cross 1999, Haensly 1999). The items usually are very similar, e.g. “Historical events underlying today’s strong interest in gifted education centers on a half-dozen people, an intelligence test, one Russian satellite, and three national reports” (Colangelo and Davis 2003, p. 6).

A few historians have explored places and narratives that do not make the conventional history of gifted education “top ten list”. For example, Greenlaw and McIntosh (1988) survey several early modifications for gifted children, although they noted that such school programs before the 1920s were rare. Newland (1976) discussed some of the first school districts that developed short-tracking and Passow (1986) framed the history of acceleration in terms of the enrichment vs. acceleration debate. On the other hand, few scholars have studied the instances of such practices in specific institutions. Nor have they studied the individuals who contributed to the establishment of special classes and differentiated curriculum for a school’s academically talented children. Franklin (1989), for example, in his investigation of Progressive Era special education in Atlanta public schools, encouraged researchers to focus on the role which individual educators and “those who manage the schools” have played in the institution of curricular differentiation (Franklin 1989, p. 593). Houston, Texas, as a city with a strong educational system during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, is particularly well-suited for a historical case study. The story of special programs for academically talented schoolchildren in Houston adds materially to the understanding of early school programs for gifted children. The *Texas School Journal*, a major educational journal in the state of Texas, called Houston’s course of study “unusually strong” and noted that the city routinely made “genuine progress” in numerous educational areas (“Editorial” 1986, p. 100).

At a time when most American public school systems made few accommodations for gifted students (Jenkins 1983, p. 21), Houston had such provisions in place as early as 1900 (HISD report 1900-1901, p. 49). Notably,

this policy also included provisions for flexible promotion in the city’s colored schools (HISD 1900-1901, p. 50). The district initially instituted a policy of grade advancement; that is, students could be promoted from one grade to another as often as teachers felt necessary. W.W. Barnett, Houston superintendent from 1900-1904, subscribed to the belief that students should work at the academic level best suited for their own development. Barnett wrote, for example, that “an extremely active mind stagnates or turns its attention elsewhere unless work is sufficiently difficult is placed before it” (HISD report 1900-1901, p. 50). Barnett’s successor retained this policy. Paul W. Horne, superintendent of the Houston city schools from 1904-1921, issued a special circular letter on promotions during the first year (1904-1905) of his superintendency. The circular endorsed the early promotion of any student who could successfully complete work at an advanced grade level. These “special promotions” were issued through a joint decision made by the classroom teacher and school principal (HISD report 1904-1905, p. 164). This early-exit system was similar to the system of short-interval promotion conceived by William T. Harris in 1868, then superintendent of the St. Louis public schools (Passow 1996, p. 93).

In 1910, Houston city schools began another accommodation for the academically talented known as “telescoping” or “short-tracking”—i.e., moving rapidly through the curriculum by completing work at a faster pace. That year, Dow School created a short-track primary class for academically advanced students, eight boys and eleven girls (HISD report 1912-1913, pp. 42 and 177). Dow, a school for white children that served the city’s Sixth Ward and a portion of the First Ward, had sixteen teachers who taught grades first through seventh. The advanced class enrolled significantly fewer children than did the regular classes which averaged 31 students per teacher (HISD report 1910-1911, p. 99). Through acceleration, these Dow students completed three years of primary work in two years [see picture 1]. Upon reaching third grade, their performance was equivalent to that of students who needed three years to complete the same curriculum (HISD 1912-1913, p. 43). District administrators were proud of this curricular innovation, and highlighted the achievements of the Dow class to both the public and the board of trustees through the annual superintendent reports.

Two years later, supervisors within the district petitioned Superintendent Horne to move away from acceleration and, instead, to employ other forms of curriculum differentiation. W.G. Smiley, Houston High School principal, for example, requested that the system conduct a special study in order to examine curricular content that better met the needs of exceptional pupils above “the line of mediocrity” (HISD 1912-1913, p. 41). Lora B. Peck,

supervisor of primary work, requested special classrooms for younger students. She wrote:

There is a serious question as to whether merely promoting more rapidly as the best solution of the problem of what shall be done for the specially capable child. We have special classes for the sub-normal pupils; we consider the children of average ability very largely. Has the unusually bright child no claim that the public school is bound to consider? Have we acknowledged and satisfied his claim when we simply allow him to work with what speed he may? Here is a problem calling for the careful attention of all thinking people (HISD 1912-1913, p. 42).

Superintendent Horne did not immediately address their concerns. Although Smiley dropped his request, Peck again petitioned the superintendent the next year, complaining that the “problem has as yet not been solved” (HISD 1913-1914, p. 55). She reiterated her doubts about the effectiveness of acceleration and suggested one possible solution:

Surely there is something better for them, but what is it? I have endeavored to find out what other cities are doing with this class of pupils but nothing seems to have been tried in the primary grades. What is the solution? I have never seen the experiment made, but I should like to try having some of these pupils begin working with a foreign language, say German (HISD 1913-1914, p. 55).

Peck suggested a form of curriculum differentiation that, almost a century later, Gallagher and Gallagher (1994, p. 100) called “novelty”—i.e. introducing new topics or programs that are not found within the schools’ standard scope and sequence. This kind of special content-oriented approach to curricular modification did not generally become popular in the 1920s (Buswell 1923, p. 687; Stedman 1924).

Following Peck’s second appeal, Superintendent Horne responded to her request immediately. His response took the form of a public commitment to provide for “the extra bright pupils” (HISD 1914-1915, p. 13). He equivocated on the issue of the value of acceleration. Specifically, he suggested special classes which involved a combination of “allowing them to complete the work of a given grade in less than the time ordinarily required” (i.e. acceleration) and “giving such pupils more work than is generally done in their respective grades” (i.e. enrichment) (HISD 1914-1915, p. 14). At the primary school level, both principals and teachers at Dow and Allen elementary schools initiated his plan. Horne also granted Peck’s request for the addition of German classes for the schools academically gifted students. These schools offered the optional German classes to students in the 5th, 6th, and 7th grades whose parents wanted their children to have this extra enrichment. However, these classes were not integrated into the students’ regular curriculum. They were offered after school so as to not interfere with their schedule of normal offerings at that grade level. At the end of the year, these pupils took an

examination that, if passed, enabled them to receive one-half year high school credit in German (HISD 1913-1914). Additionally, Superintendent Horne’s policies enabled 7th grade students to go to the nearby Houston high school for extra enrichment. In addition to German, they could choose Latin, Spanish, algebra or history (HISD 1915-1916, p. 17). These provisions for enrichment and acceleration were not accorded to gifted colored students.

Lora B. Peck’s ideas of formal provisions for gifted students in the Houston Schools’ primary grades clearly affected the system’s program of studies. She questioned the benefits of acceleration years before this issue received national attention: “I am not convinced that it is desirable to rush these children through the grades too immature for the studies to be taken up” (HISD 1913-1914, p. 55). Her visionary ideas were similar to those published nationally ten years later by notable gifted educator, Leta Stetter Hollingsworth (1926). Peck’s local advocacy and commitment to education for the academically gifted reveals that tensions between the notions of acceleration and enrichment not only were present in the early part of the twentieth-century. These tensions also could be resolved at the local level. Peck’s unsuccessful attempt to locate neighboring Texas cities with similar school programs for gifted children (HISD 1913-1914, p. 55) illustrates that her ideas and programs were novel to the region. Certainly, Peck was an educational reformer who identified an area of need, explored alternatives, and successfully lobbied for change. Houston Supervisor Peck represents an unacknowledged leader of gifted education reform.

In addition to its use of acceleration and special classes, the Houston public schools instituted another provision designed “to take care of the extra bright child” (HISD 1915-1916, p. 20). The policy enabled Houston schools to provide special one-on-one tutoring to advanced students during the regular classroom day. Beginning with the 1915-1916 school year, unassigned teachers (ones who were employed on a daily basis to serve at schools that needed substitutes and aides) and supernumeraries (e.g. high school normal program graduates without first grade certificates) pulled gifted intermediate students for “special coaching” (HISD 1915-1916, p. 20).

During this period of time, Houston gifted students were identified in their classroom. Classroom teachers made judgments about early promotion, short-track placements and pull-out tutoring. They appeared to have been alert both to students’ general ability and grades, as were teachers elsewhere in the nation (Hildreth, 1966, p. 48). Although the Stanford-Binet IQ test was created in 1908, teachers seldom used it in connection with giftedness until it was revised by Terman in 1916 (Assouline 2003, p. 125; Morelock and Feldman 2003, p. 456). In the Houston city schools, the Binet test was used to identify “sub-normal” pupils, but not for gifted children (HISD 1914-1915, p. 15). Yet not all curricular modifications for the gifted in the Houston city schools necessitated student identification. The extra classes offered to some of its 5th, 6th and 7th grade students were available to any student who wished for additional enrichment.

However successful the Houston experience was believed to be, not all Texas educators believed that curriculum differentiation served the best interest of gifted children. Eleanor Kennedy's article in the *Texas School Magazine*, for example, argued against any sort of ability grouping in schools. She opined, furthermore, that curricular differentiation for gifted students resulted in a weakening of the physical body (Kennedy 1911, p. 10). Her theory was popular during these times and not generally questioned until the publication of Leta Stetter Hollingworth's *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture*, (1929). This claim, on the other hand, received no attention in any of Houston's annual school reports during this period.

Knowledge of special provisions for gifted students in Houston schools during the early years of the twentieth century adds significantly to the body of historical knowledge about early gifted education in the United States. For the most part, only a few American city school systems have been recognized to have made special accommodations for gifted pupils early in the twentieth-century (Hildreth 1966, p. 47; Colangelo and Davis 2003, p. 6). Indeed, schools of Houston, Texas, a southern city recognized for its educational innovations, must be added to this list of vanguard school districts.

References

- Assouline, Susan. 2003. "Psychological and Educational Assessment of Gifted Children". In Nicholas Colangelo and Gary Davis, eds. *The Handbook of Gifted Education, third edition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Buswell, G. T. 1923. "The School Treatment of Mentally Exceptional Children". *The Elementary School Journal*. v23, n9 (May): 683-693.
- Colangelo, Nicholas and Gary A. Davis. 2003. "Introduction and Overview". In Nicholas Colangelo and Gary Davis, eds. *The Handbook of Gifted Education, third edition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cross, Tracy. 1999. "Top Ten List (Plus or Minus Two) for the 20th Century". *Gifted Child Today Magazine*, v22, n6, 1999: 22-25.
- "Editorial." 1896. *The Texas School Journal* 14, n3 (Mar): 100
- Gallagher, J and S. Gallagher. 1994. *Teaching the Gifted Child, fourth edition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Greenlaw, M. And Margaret McIntosh. 1988. *Educating the Gifted: A Sourcebook*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Heansly, Patricia A. 1999. "My View of the 'Top 10' Events That Have Influenced the Field of Gifted Education During the Past Century". *Gifted Child Today Magazine*, v22, n6: 16-18.
- Hildenbrand, Suzanne. 1981. *Democracy's Aristocrat: The Gifted Child in America, 1910-1960*. U.S, Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document ED 206 144.
- Hildreth, Gertrude. 1966. *Introduction to the Gifted*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Hollingsworth, Leta. 1926. *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Houston Independent School District. Annual. *Report of the Superintendent of Houston Public Schools*. (Houston: Gray, Dillaye and Co). 1904-1905, 1908-1909, 1910-1911, 1912-1913, 1913-1914, 1914-1915, 1915-1916.
- Jenkins, Rita Virginia Moore. 1983. *Gifted and Talented Education in Texas Public Schools 1915-1983*. Unpublished Dissertation. Waco: Baylor University.
- Kennedy, Eleanor. 1911. "Abnormally Bright Children". *Texas School Magazine*. 14, n8 (Dec): 9-11.
- Morelock, Martha and David Feldman. "Extreme Precocity: Prodigies, Savants and Children of Extraordinarily High IQ". In Nicholas Colangelo and Gary Davis, eds. *The Handbook of Gifted Education, third edition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Passow, A. 1996. "Acceleration Over the Years". In Camilla Benbow and David Lubinski, eds. *Intellectual Talent: Psychometric and Social Issues*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 93-98.
- Van Sickle, J. H. 1910. "Provision for Gifted Children in Public Schools". *The Elementary School Teacher*. V.10, n.8 (Apr): 357-366.

