

## *A Class By Themselves? The Origins of Special Education in Toronto and Beyond* by Jason Ellis

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*A Class By Themselves?*  
*The Origins of Special Education*  
*in Toronto and Beyond*

By Jason Ellis

Toronto: University of Toronto Press,  
 2019. 384 pages. \$32.95 Paper. ISBN  
 9781442628717. (www.utorontopress.com)

In early twentieth-century Toronto, special needs education authorities, working with governments, and influenced by medical experts, established a segregated approach to managing exceptional children in schools. They established a set of norms that defined types of exceptionalities and the methodologies for how educators should address each classification of students. Their actions, still relevant today, were the product of debates regarding types of programs, testing, and services to employ, with a public education focus to manage student differences as problems in need of solutions. In the book *A Class by Themselves? The Origins of Special Education in Toronto and Beyond*, Jason Ellis provides a welcomed addition to the history of special needs education in Ontario. A thorough and well written manuscript, Ellis examines special education initiatives from 1910-1945. This study focuses on the changing attitudes, labels, initiatives, and solutions in addressing the needs of pupils with “disabilities and learning difficulties” (25). Ellis examines an extensive number of documents, drawing on a wide range of primary records, including the public records of more than 1,300 auxiliary students who attended three Toronto urban public schools. Reading between the lines, Ellis does an excellent analysis of the data, which consisted of



the official accounts of schools, teachers, administrators, medical practitioners, and psychologists. The author accessed the records from the archives of the Toronto Board of Education (TBE) which, along with a number of teacher, government, and public health reports, form the basis for this study. Influenced by reformers and eugenicists, the TBE established the “first four classes for mentally defective children in 1910” (4) and this book follows the changes in policies until 1945, as the school board embarks on post-war expansion. The book explores a wide range of children from different backgrounds and identities, immigrants and ethnic minorities, and students from working, middle and upper classes, providing a reflection of the ways special needs education was applied broadly. State decisions divided communities and

impacted the well-being of students.

The book contains six chapters reflecting debates and state changes to the education of exceptional children. The history reflects the ways reformers, eugenicists, medical experts, school boards, and educational authorities, implemented segregated or inclusive classrooms. Decisions were based on core beliefs of the root of learning disabilities—whether they were intractable or environmental conditions. Ellis includes two appendices; the Public Record cards he investigated and Auxiliary Program Enrolment statistics. The book also provides a rich collection of illustrations and figures. Ellis thoroughly examines the numerous debates between inspectors, school boards, school trustees and superintendents about the most efficient management of disabled students, examining issues of class, race, and gender, and children with physical challenges. He carefully deconstructs how the TBE managed student differences through a series of initiatives that maintained societal norms and institutional power.

During the first half of the twentieth century, large public education systems were a product of growing urban centres and required significant organizational leadership. Ellis makes the links between “male progressives” who wanted to make political change and this included “applying “bureaucratic measures” to the Toronto schools in order to attack “educational waste” and “unscientific methods of school administration” (13). Throughout the book, Ellis argues that demands for auxiliary education “were deeply nested within a broad reform movement that exceeded the bounds of education alone” (13). This is an important point in this book, as history of education research is often isolated from political, social, and

economic histories, yet the broader institutional links are evident. The focus on a centralized control curriculum reflect standardization across state arenas and remain impactful today.

The first few chapters of the book reflect on how definitions of exceptional children centred on a child’s hereditary background, demographics, class, race, and gender. Chapter one explores the placing of exceptional children into separate classes, and draws direct links to the eugenics movement, especially the work of Dr. Helen MacMurchy, that led to the “development of auxiliary classes for mental deficiencies” in Toronto in 1910 and classes for children labelled “merely backward” but “not defective” (7). Ellis argues that the “eugenics approach “was not to remediate but rather to segregate” and suggests the “reverberation of these categories, constructed mainly in the 1910s... may still be felt in public schooling more than a century later” (51). Early “auxiliary educators” were advised by experts, the Department of Education, and school board authorities. Superintendent E.R. Johnson, for example “instructed teachers to prepare mentally defective children for institutional life” (25).

In addition to separate classes, other initiatives to remove children from regular classrooms included forest schooling, open-air classes, and special classes for immigrant children, whose first language was not English. I appreciated the many images provided in the chapter; including photographs by the Toronto Board of Education or Department of Public Works of the Forest School in High Park and Orde P.S. open-air schools.

By the 1920s, auxiliary education reforms were supported by IQ testing. Ellis explores the impact of IQ testing as a tool for defining “normal” and the ways

the tests were used to justify education streaming. The Stanford-Binet intelligence tests were a product of the work of psychologists who believed “that everyone’s intelligence was innate and inherited” (57). The test was “simple to give and score, the answers and scoring guide included in the book” (57) and therefore became standardized and incorporated across school boards. IQ testing results provided justification to isolate and manage students, as diagnosis and placement become efficient and consistent. Ellis suggests that the impact of IQ tests went beyond the mere streaming of students. It was used to confirm the notion that lower intelligence was innate, “forever fixed” and thus contained broader implications. Once the test results were calculated and labels applied, “the direction of a child’s schooling could change drastically and permanently” (71). The author further explores the ways in which standards were used to disproportionately remove particular students based on their race, class, gender, and ethnicity and provides enrolment demographic statistics in TBE auxiliary classes. The posters and charts in chapter two provide important support that children from certain ethnic backgrounds or communities were disproportionately represented. I appreciated that Ellis took the time to demonstrate the ways in which some students were not compliant with the testing; embracing forms of resistance to establish their agency, refusing to participate, complete tests, or challenging assessments (72-73).

Chapters three and four explore the ways overcrowding in the schools (due to new school attendance laws) focused on vocational programs as a way to stream “non-academic” children. Again IQ testing played a major role in establishing

“intellectually disabled” children with a push towards domestic training. By the mid-1920s the TBE offered special programs for sight-saving classes, “oralist day school classes” that taught lip-reading to the deaf, hard of hearing and speech classes as well as “orthopaedic classes for children with physical disabilities” (130). Ellis adds that the accommodation of students with different needs continued to centre on how “schools expected them to adapt their bodies and senses” to “normalcy” standards (126). He explores how individual students faced a variety of outcomes in terms of their abilities to adapt.

In the last two chapters, Ellis suggests the TBE shifted from management mechanisms to new programming, based on new research by brain injury medical experts and psychologists to develop subject based disability learning. The shift meant that students labelled with disabilities could undergo change. The term “learning disabilities” replaced earlier terms that reflected little could be done, thus new diagnostic tools and resources were implemented. Education policy maintained that a child’s development might be impacted by environmental influences, and therefore proper treatment was central to change. But despite these shifts, Ellis reflects on the ways, race, class, and ethnicity continued to play a role in discriminating particular groups of children. By the end of this study, shifting ideas about differently-abled children are challenging earlier twentieth century educational thought, as changing attitudes and approaches set new norms.

Although this study focuses on schools in the former Toronto Board of Education, Ellis reveals, throughout the book, the ways in which educational ideas spread widely through urban school boards, who were collectively influenced

by experts. The TBE turned to British and American schools for education best practices, as urban schools faced similar challenges and needs. This study provides an excellent contribution to education history, the history of special education, disability studies, and public policy. It gives important context to current debates and the impact of testing and curriculum standards on diverse student populations. What is evident in this study is the wide ranging controls state institutions have to direct student lives. The TBE was acting upon institutional experts and supports when designing and maintaining programs for children, many which had broad

-ranging impacts. However, as Ellis also acknowledges, policies were also contested by reformers, parent groups, experts, and students, who challenged governments to alter adverse special education policies in order to better address student needs. It is this activism that continues to play an important role in ensuring the removal of discriminatory policies that children with disabilities commonly face, so that all students have equitable and successful educational outcomes.

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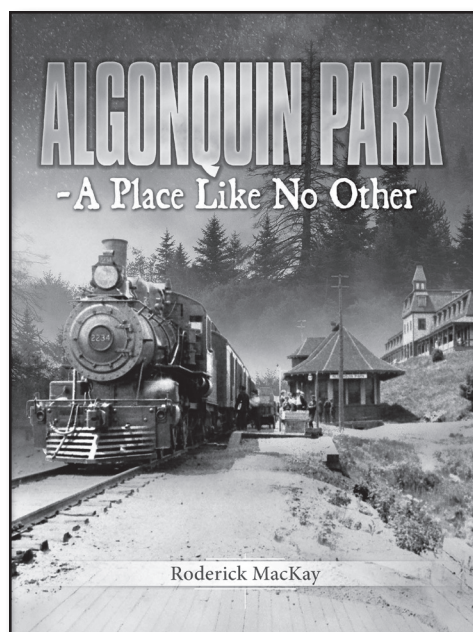
## *Algonquin Park—A Place Like No Other*

### *A History of Algonquin Provincial Park*

By Roderick MacKay

Whitney, Ontario: Friends of Algonquin Park, 2018.  
432 pages. \$34.50 Softcover. ISBN 9781894993708.  
(<http://store.algonquinpark.on.ca/cgi/algonquinpark/01613.html>)

Roderick MacKay's *Algonquin Park—A Place Like No Other: A History of Algonquin Provincial Park* is published by The Friends of Algonquin Provincial Park (FOAP). This detail is exceptionally important for understanding the depth of material that MacKay draws from throughout the volume. FOAP, which was established in 1983, was the first “Friends of” non-profit park groups to be established in Ontario and has played a major part in the recent history of Algonquin Provincial Park. The strength and size of FOAP as a non-profit organization enables it to maintain its own park archive within the park boundaries, which is exception-



ally rare for an individual provincial park. Access to this archive and other materials, combined with MacKay's deep personal connection to the park, lead to a dizzyingly detailed and rich history of Algonquin that was decades in the making.

*A Place Like No Other* stands out