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# Creating the Continuum: J. E. Wallace Wallin and the Role of Clinical Psychology in the Emergence of Public School Special Education in America

## **Comments**

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**Creating the Continuum:  
J. E. Wallace Wallin and the Role of Clinical Psychology in the  
Emergence of Public School Special Education in America**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the history of the continuum of services in intellectual disability programs. The emergence of public school special education in the United States in the first two decades of the 20th century is used as a case study of this history by focusing on events and personalities connected to the St. Louis Public Schools. Using Annual Reports from the era along with the abundant publications and personal papers of J.E. Wallace Wallin, the author explores how the growing class of specialists in clinical psychology and psychometrics gained a foothold in the schools as educational gatekeepers for student placements along an increasingly elaborate “continuum of care.” The paper interprets this quest for professional legitimacy as a three-sided conversation with Wallin (and his colleagues) in the middle between the medical officers of institutions for the feeble-minded on the one hand, and the educators of urban school systems on the other. Implications for the current discussions of inclusive approaches to education are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** inclusion, history, special education

Across all domains of life, support and intervention programs for people with intellectual disabilities are dominated today by a specific model of service delivery that ties the level of support to the separateness and specialization of the physical setting where the support is provided. Whether one looks at residential support, vocational support, or educational support, this continuum of placements is the primary model for arranging services in a linear progression from the most segregated and restrictive to the most integrated and least restrictive. This arrangement is so ubiquitous that it is difficult to even notice the assumptions that govern its operation. It is as though the arrangement of services in such a manner is not really a choice, but a self-evident truth about how and where the people who need support should interact with the people approved by society to provide that support (Valle & Connor 2011, 41).

Of course, the continuum logic has not gone totally unchallenged. Almost 25 years ago, Taylor (1988) published a powerful and often-cited critique of both how this continuum arrangement failed to do what it promised, and moreover, how flawed were the assumptions that drove the continuum logic in the first place. Since Taylor's argument appeared there have been significant attempts to move away from the continuum logic by breaking the linkage between the intensity of support and the separateness of setting. Many proponents of inclusive approaches to education, versions of supported employment, supported living, and self-directed services all put forth their reforms not as an additional placement option to be added on at the least restrictive end of the continuum, but as an alternative to the very model of a continuum of care. By

separating the notions of support and placement, these reforms have directly challenged that logic whereby a more inclusive program unavoidably entails less intensive supports. Despite these reform initiatives, it remains almost as true today as in 1988 that the service systems for both children and adults with intellectual disabilities are organized and defended at all levels of government as a continuum of placement options.

To understand the power and persistence of the continuum model, it may be helpful to learn more about its history. Indeed, it may be useful simply to establish that there is, in fact, a history to the model. Although the sequence of events varies somewhat depending on the type of services, the continuum of services as it is known today is little more than 100 years old, with many of the key developments happening in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One strand of that story may be found in the emergence of public school special education programs. This review looks at the birth of the continuum in the education of children with intellectual disabilities. In particular, it recounts how that system first emerged in one important city of the time (St. Louis) under the guidance of one of the most important clinical psychologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (J. E. Wallace Wallin). In the exploration of Wallin's and others' efforts to develop an increasingly elaborate system of placements to match the equally elaborate classifications and educational categories that he was describing, one can find a valuable case study of how the continuum became so quickly entrenched in the array of service systems for people with intellectual disabilities.

### **The Emergence of Special Education: The Traditional Accounts**

In 1901, there were 70,000 students in the St. Louis public schools, yet the only provision for students with disabilities was a “deaf school” that had been in operation for 20 years within existing elementary school buildings, and moved to its own school in 1901. The next two decades saw a veritable explosion of special education programs and classrooms across the country. Nationally, by 1922, over 130 cities in 23 states reported serving an enrollment of over 23,000 pupils in special education classes of all types (Scheerenberger 1983, 166). St. Louis was no exception. What happened in St. Louis reflected what was going on in large city school districts throughout the country in the Progressive Era. In the relative short span of roughly 20 years -- and most especially during the decade from 1910 to 1920 – special education became established as a distinct part of the public school systems in versions that many would recognize as very similar to what exists today. By 1921, almost 4 % of the student population in St. Louis was enrolled in just the classes for “mental retardates of various levels,” not to mention programs for a variety of other categories of disability or delinquency (Wallin 1954, 65). An emerging field of clinical psychology claimed jurisdiction for assessment, classification, and professional development of a new class of teacher. A distinct curriculum of compliance training, manual arts, exercise, and limited, if any, traditional academics was rapidly developed and promulgated as essential for different gradations of backwardness or defect, with a requirement of specialized preparation for those who wished to be recognized as part of an emerging profession of special educator.

As with most such historical developments that become noteworthy in retrospect as marking the beginning or ending of something important, the question arises as to why

the emergence of special education happened, and why it happened when it did. There is already a fairly extensive literature exploring the beginnings of special education classes in American public schools (e.g., Franklin 1994; Lazerson 1983; Osgood 2000; 2005; Richardson 1999; Tropea 1987). However, for the most part these accounts approach the developments of separate classes and schools as part of the evolution of the public education system in the United States. More specifically, many reviews generally place the emergence and (more importantly) the enforcement of compulsory attendance laws at the heart of the development. Perhaps the most prominent historian of public education of his generation, Lawrence Cremin, summarized the argument in unself-conscious terms in 1961:

Compulsory school attendance marked a new era in the history of American education. The crippled, the blind, the deaf, the sick, the slow-witted, and the needy arrived in growing numbers. Thousands of recalcitrants and incorrigibles who in former times might have dropped out of school now became public charges for a minimum period. (cited in Trent 1994, 145)

Although the terminology has changed, the primary historical account of the origins of special education remains the same. In his history of special education in Boston, Robert Osgood (2000) reiterates Cremin's account while also placing specific emphasis on the first special classes and the attention given to mental deficiency in particular.

For Boston, special classes represented still another attempt by its school officials to differentiate public school students for purposes



of educational efficiency and economy. And in antedating by more than a decade similar programs offered in the system for children with a variety of disabilities, the special class constituted a core component of the evolution of specialized instructional settings in the city. The growth of these classes reveals much about the impact of compulsory education on public schooling. (127-28).

All of this is entirely legitimate and worthwhile. If one adds in the rapid adoption of the Binet IQ test after its translation and promulgation by H. H. Goddard starting in 1908, then the dominant explanatory framework is pretty much in place. Enforcement of compulsory attendance, together with waves of immigrant children from Southern Europe and rural America, brought together a much broader representation of children in the urban public school classrooms. The diversity of students and academic capacity threatened – in the official version of educational administrators – to overwhelm the general classroom teacher. This, in turn, supposedly threatened the progress and normal development of the typical students, with their teachers' time and attention increasingly diverted to the needs of those who "could not keep up." Just as this pressure was growing to remove these children from the general education classroom without returning them to the streets, the standardized intelligence test emerged as a seemingly scientific tool with which to identify and sort these educational misfits with the type of efficiency that the Progressive era held in such high esteem (Troen 1979).

## **An Alternative Account:**

### **The Beginnings of Special Education in St. Louis**

What is missing from this account, though, is an attempt to fill out the explanatory frame by shifting perspectives. The purpose of this review, then, is not so much to argue for or against the importance of compulsory education laws and the use of IQ tests as it is simply to add an additional element or strand of analysis that ties special education to the larger context of disability programs and professional specialization (Rapley 2004). This historical review explores the emergence of special education in the public schools (especially as it applied to children referred to as “feeble-minded” or “mental defectives”) as part of a three-sided conversation with a new class of clinical psychologists in the middle, straddling an emerging territory of differential diagnosis and programmatic expertise located somewhere between the public schools and the asylums for “idiots.” On one side of this conversation were the medical officers, psychiatrists, and institution superintendents who – for the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – had been the accepted experts on the appropriate social response to the “burden of the feeble-minded” (Fernald 1912). On the other side were those educators and school administrators who were increasingly forced to deal with a newly identified class of backward and defective children showing up in their schools. In the figurative middle, with connections both to the schools and to the asylums were people such as J.E. Wallace Wallin, Lightner Witmer and others seeking professional legitimacy for their relatively young profession of clinical child psychology. One way of gaining this legitimacy was to gain functional control over the rapidly expanding continuum of placements that was emerging between residential asylums on the one end and the general education classroom on the other. Finally, the

study concludes with some brief speculation that this expanded framework continues to be relevant to current discussions of inclusive approaches to education for students with intellectual disabilities in America's schools.

It is difficult, and not especially useful, to establish where in the United States the first public school classroom for backward or defective students was started. As early as 1872, William Torrey Harris, Superintendent of St. Louis schools in the 1860s before becoming the U. S. Commissioner of Education, called attention to what he referred to as "pedagogical misfits" in the St. Louis schools (cited in Hollingsworth 1922, 273), but did little while in St. Louis or Washington, D.C. to act on that observation. Many accounts give the nod to special classes begun in Providence in 1896 (Esten 1900; Osgood 2000; Scheerenberger 1983). Others report earlier arrangements started in Cleveland with 20 "ungraded" classes begun in 1893 (Mitchell 1916). Whatever the case, by 1900, Boston and New York were quickly becoming the largest and most prominent special education systems. St. Louis was not far behind. In July of 1906, the St. Louis School Board adopted a plan for establishing a series of special schools:

Some of these special schools are intended as day schools for truant and unruly boys. Other special schools are to be established for the care of children of defective mentality. Of the latter class, there are about 250 scattered over the city and attending regular classes in the district schools without deriving much benefit from the work. (St. Louis Public Schools 1905/06, 203).

It is important to notice that what Superintendent Frank Soldan had in mind was the creation of totally separate schools, rather than the separate "ungraded" classrooms

that New York and other large systems were adopting (Farrell 1914b).<sup>1</sup> Soldan had apparently traveled to Europe and visited the systems of separate, “auxiliary” schools used by Germany and England for feeble-minded children (Maennel 1907; Wallin 1955, 64). For St. Louis, Soldan was specific about the size and accommodation needed. Each of these schools was, in actuality, to be a house with two rooms used for classes of 15 students each (compared to the 50 or more that a typical elementary school classroom might have) along with living space for one teacher who would also be responsible for maintenance of the property. In fact, after building the first such school from scratch, the district rented houses in various residential neighborhoods for the rest of its special schools well into the 1920s. The first three of these schools were opened in January, 1908 with the official title of “Special Schools for Individual Training.” As Soldan wrote, such a name “indicates their purpose and avoids the stigma which the name ‘Schools for Defectives’ would carry” (St. Louis Public Schools 1905/06, 208). Finally, Soldan was also careful to indicate which students should and should not be placed in these schools. Only those who were “mentally weak’ but still capable of learning should be admitted.

The mentally unbalanced or the imbecile child requires the watchful nurture of an asylum, and cannot be taken care of in these special schools . . . On the other hand, no child who can in any way profit sufficiently from instruction in the ordinary school should be transferred to the special room [i.e., separate school]. (St. Louis Public Schools 1905/06, 209).

Despite the Superintendent's indication of appropriate referrals, it quickly became clear that both the terminology and the children intended for referral were far from settled. During these first decades of the century, the literature is replete with different terms for the same types of children and the same terms applied to different types of children. While there was general agreement that those children called "idiots" and most – if not all -- of those called "imbeciles" belonged in institutions rather than public schools, there was much discussion of this newly identified population of backward children. While 'backward' was the most common label, other terms abounded, each with its proponents and proposed application: feebly gifted mentally, mentally subnormal, mentally weak, mental deficient, defective, feeble-minded, morons, slow learners, pedagogically retarded, and the ever-popular, dullards, laggards and ne'er-do-wells. Many writers used several of the terms, insisting on important distinctions they felt should be carried by the various labels.

Needless to say, the terminological confusion led to disagreement over which children were even appropriate for the new separate schools. In St. Louis, the first Supervisor of these Special Schools, Kate Cunningham, reported that the intended population was not entirely clear to everyone who was sending children to them.

We have found it necessary to refuse several and eliminate a few cases of feeble-minded children. These cannot be cared for in the Special Schools; and several cases of backward and dull children have been refused. The Special School is not planned for the child who if given enough can accomplish the work, in kind, that is done by the normal child. (St. Louis Public Schools 1907/08, 238).

Even Cunningham herself, apparently, was not entirely clear on the distinctions, or at least on how to identify which students fit and which did not.

Our work is new to us, and we are not all agreed as to which is the defective and which the backward child; we are not sure as to what is exactly the proper treatment for the defective child when we have defined him. But we are convinced that opportunities for psychological research are present on every side.  
( 238)

By 1920 some of this profusion of terminological choices had fallen away, as the generic terms of ‘feeble-mindedness’ and “backward” children came to dominate the literature of special education. A clinical psychologist, J. E. Wallace Wallin, with a background of experience working with Goddard and other prominent institutional researchers had arrived in 1914 and quickly established a ‘Psycho-educational Clinic’ as the diagnostic gatekeeper for identifying and placing children in their proper setting. What had been a jumble of labels with only one or two placement options became, at least in theory, a growing continuum of both diagnostic categories and specialized educational settings. For St. Louis, a growing number of ‘ungraded classes’ was added to the network of separate schools that already existed. Broadly speaking, the separate schools were for those children initially referred to as “mentally deficient,” but most commonly called “feeble-minded” after 1910 or so. While improvement was possible for these children, the condition was seen as clearly incurable and the dependency lifelong. Indeed, this definition was put forth by Wallin and others as virtually irrefutable. In his first major textbook on mental subnormality, Wallin (1917) quotes with approval the circular logic of the English authority Tredgold:

[T]he essence of mental defect is that it is incurable . . . and upon this fact all authorities are agreed. When, therefore, it is found that a proportion of the urban defectives attending special schools are returned as cured to the ordinary schools, it is clear that an error of diagnosis has been made, and that they were not defectives. (cited in Wallin 1917, 57)

The ungraded classes were to be reserved for the various types of backward children, with the prospects of eventual return for many of these to the regular classroom, but, in any case to be offered a curriculum much closer to that of the regular student than the emphasis on the manual arts that was used in the special schools.

Finally, for those children identified as idiots or imbeciles, the public schools were thought to be inappropriate in any configuration. Wallin (1917) reports the results of what he calls a “strong-arm census” of St. Louis elementary schools done in 1916 as part of an effort to “rout out” all of the feeble-minded children in the regular grades. In this census, Wallin says, the principals were “emphatically instructed by the superintendent” to report all “feeble-minded” pupils remaining in their schools. In his comments, Wallin focused on the results of his “clinical” examinations of those students identified from this census as part of his effort to determine what percentage were truly feeble-minded. However, in a footnote, he reveals that some 40% of those ultimately identified as feeble-minded were thought to be of “too low mentality” even for the special schools (Wallin 1917, 73).

By 1921, when Wallin left St. Louis, the Public Schools had 25 “special schools for individualized instruction” with over 500 students enrolled (Wallin 1921, 58). There were another 3,260 students enrolled in over 60 ungraded classes located in schools

throughout the city (Wallin 1921, 60). The district had taken responsibility for all instruction at the former “House of Refuge” – now called the Industrial School. A teacher training program designed to provide a steady flow of teachers (unmarried women only) specifically prepared as special educators was operated as part of the general ‘normal school’ run by the school district. Administrators from other cities were visiting St. Louis to learn more about the breadth of special education services that Superintendent Soldan and subsequent leaders had created (Franklin 1994, 38). The city had its own Psycho-Educational clinic which examined all students referred for some type of special education. Wallin, who had started the clinic in 1914 was getting ready to move on, but was pushing until the end for even more categories of students with educational disabilities that needed to be evaluated and placed as well as expansion of services throughout the state of Missouri.

### **The Expansion of Psychological Control**

If the example of St. Louis schools between 1908 and 1921 is taken as roughly typical of what was occurring in large cities throughout the country, then what additional explanations appear beyond the enforcement of compulsory attendance and educational administration? The remainder of this review frames these developments in special education as part of an urgent attempt by clinical psychologists, affiliated with both schools and asylums, to legitimize their professional and bureaucratic control of the mentally subnormal population, whether backward or feeble-minded. Three specific themes emerge that support the explanatory power of this perspective: (1) the use of special education as a clearinghouse for the institutions; (2) the maintenance and



expansion of clinical judgment for diagnostic precision; and (3) the need to overcome parental resistance to social control and separation of their children.

### **Schools as Institutional Clearinghouses**

At the end of 1903 a “special census” was conducted to find the number of “insane and feeble-minded in hospitals and institutions” (U.S. Census 1906). The results found that there were over 13,884 individuals living in public institutions (Lakin 1979, 70). While this represented a dramatic increase of over 9000 inmates from the last special census in 1890, it still meant that less than .02 % of the general population (or 20/100,000 people) were housed in such facilities. By the time of a similar special census in 1923, that institutional population had grown to almost 48,000. Yet even with this increase, the rate of institutionalization was still slightly less than .04 % of the general population. The institutional psychologists of the first two decades (e.g., Goddard, Kuhlman) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century argued that between 2 and 3% of population were feeble-minded. In other words, even in the midst of the eugenicists’ campaign (Fernald 1912; Goddard 1912/1925) to portray feeble-minded people as an economic burden and social menace to the health of the nation, only a small fraction of these individuals were actually institutionalized.

By 1903, the superintendents had abandoned most of their optimistic claims of cure that had been made some 50 years earlier when their specialized asylums were just beginning. Improvement for some, but custody above all was now the guiding purpose of the institutions. From a professional perspective, the

institutional leaders were at a dead-end in terms of expanding their clientele. The vast majority of the feeble-minded remained in the community. Yet, the capacity of the asylums seemed hopelessly constrained even with aggressive expansion and building new facilities. In this context, those psychologists specializing in the feeble-minded population must have seen the emergence of special classes as an excellent location for expansion of professional jurisdiction. The special classes then became portrayed by community-based clinical psychologists such as Wallin – but also by the institutional administrators – as a convenient bureaucratic arrangement for them to identify and monitor a non-institutionalized clientele.

This explanation also provides an additional perspective on the use of the compulsory education laws. One often overlooked feature of these laws that are found so central to the origins of special education is that they were, for the most part, as much about who could be excluded from attending school as they were about who should be compelled to do so. So, for example, until 1921, Missouri's compulsory attendance law specifically exempted physically and intellectually disabled children from public school. In 1919, the state passed a law (proposed by Wallin) requiring districts to “establish special classes for blind, deaf, feeble-minded and crippled children when there are ten or more of each type in a given school district” (Wallin 1921b, 447). Richardson argues that it was precisely because these exclusions in the compulsory attendance laws were “more symbolic than enforceable” that schools were driven to create the special classes for those disabled students who entered the schools despite the laws (Richardson 1999, 47).

One can argue that from the perspective of professional legitimization, clinical psychologists may not have wanted to enforce such rules until they had the chance to exhibit their diagnostic expertise in differentiating the truly “institutional cases” from the “merely backward.” A compendium of quotations from the era can perhaps serve to illustrate the type of language about the clearing-house function that appeared in almost any writing about the purpose of the special classes.

### *Clearinghouse*

In the early Boston classes, as least 10% of those students referred for placement were sent directly on to the institution at Waverly (Lincoln 1909/10, 89). Walter Fernald, the superintendent of Waverly and perhaps the most prominent asylum superintendent of the era, was clear that the gradualism of such a process of separation and removal was also helpful in circumventing parental resistance as well.

There are now special public-school classes for the feeble-minded in most of our cities and large towns. These classes insure diagnosis and treatment at an early age, they help inform the parents as to the dangers of the condition and they admirably serve as clearing houses for permanent segregation before adult life is reached. (Fernald 1912, 95)

There certainly was some grumbling by school administrators about this use of their system. For them, the presence of imbeciles and morons was an inappropriate drain on the resources and time of teachers and others. To this, the

superintendent at the Vineland institution in New Jersey had a response on the reality of the situation:

Public-school men may say, “This is not our problem”. To say this means nothing. The children are here; they are present in the public school in large numbers. They cannot be turned out. What are they going to do about it? The only thing to do is to give them the best care and training possible. Keep them in the special classes until they become too old for further care in the school and then they must be sent to the institutions for safety, or they must be transferred to their homes, if they are such as can be trusted there. As I said, the special classes must be the clearing-houses. (Johnstone 1908, 1115)

### *Holding Tank*

For Wallin, in St. Louis, there was no waiting institution such as Waverly or Vineland. The one facility in Missouri was in Marshall, almost 200 miles away. Moreover, there was a waiting list of over 600 by the time Wallin arrived in St. Louis. In this set of circumstances, the special classes became holding tanks more than clearing houses because there were no suitable asylum placements for feeble-minded children in the St. Louis area. For this reason, Wallin felt compelled to accept all but true idiots into the special classes in St. Louis. “Ideally no grades lower than the low-grade morons should be trained in the public schools. But in practice this criterion cannot be enforced unless the community is content to permit a large number of children to grow up without any form of discipline or

training, or with such precarious care and training as they would receive in many homes. (Wallin 1917, 283-84)

Indeed, Wallin lobbied for the creation of a “residential school or colony” which would receive those children who “cannot profit measurably by the work afforded in the special day schools” ( 284). Control of these colonies should, of course, remain under the jurisdiction of the psycho-educational clinic. Something like this is what actually happened, and shows the process of professional control by psychologists working in reverse when there was no institutional base in existence at the beginnings of the special classes. The St. Louis Training School (an institution still in operation today as the Bellefontaine Habilitation Center) officially opened in 1924. One account of the process reports that advocates persuaded the St. Louis schools to assume responsibility for all instruction at the new asylum:

Through the persuasion of Mrs. Elias Michael [the first female member of the Board of Education] and Miss Lillie Ernst [principal of Blewitt High School] the cooperation of the Board of Education was obtained in naming the Training School as one of its Special Schools and in installing specially trained teachers to teach the children.

(Anderson 1938, 28-29)

By 1934, the Board had made a “radical” change by withdrawing all of its regularly appointed teachers from assignment to the institution. A visit to the facility apparently convinced the Board that “the results of formal training for the mentally deficient children in this institution did not warrant the heavy

expenditure for trained teachers they had provided in the past” (Anderson 1938, 124).

*Institutional finishing school.*

If the clearing-house and the holding tank descriptions proved too custodial in tone, then some psychologists went further by proclaiming the separate school as what could be called a ‘finishing school’ for life in the institution. The goal for special education, then, was not just to identify candidates for the asylum, but prepare them to be helpful and compliant in their future incarceration. Special educators, in other words, had a role as pre-institutional instructors. Speaking of the Cleveland special classes, David Mitchell proclaimed this as the primary aim of any instruction of feeble-minded children.

[M]odern science shows that when these people [i.e., the epileptic and feeble-minded] reach the age of maturity they should become permanent residents of institutions. For this reason their training should be directed toward making them capable of contributing something toward their own maintenance in a place where most of their actions are directed by others. Since the aim is segregation of all those who will find it impossible to maintain an independent existence, it is not desirable to attempt to training them for association with normal people. (Mitchell 1916, 22-23)

Wallin endorsed a very similar position for the St. Louis schools, referring to what he saw as poor outcomes for those who remained in the community after leaving the special school. It was research, Wallin said, that persuaded him to continue to

support the position which I have for long taken, that the public schools' duty toward the feeble-minded is to identify them, segregate them in special schools, and then provide them with the type of training which will directly and maximally equip them for practical remunerative service, in state or municipal colonies. (Wallin 1915, 120)

### **The Extension of Clinical Judgment**

A second way in which psychologists expanded their control of the feeble-minded population was through diagnostic elaboration. By the time of Wallin's departure from St. Louis in 1921, he had developed a taxonomy of feeble-mindedness and intelligence that encompassed at least seven different levels of educational impairment: "from lowest to highest, idiot, imbecile, moron (constituting the feeble-minded class), borderline, backward, retarded, and normal" (Wallin 1923, 170). While not all of these levels referred to feeble-mindedness as such (e.g., Wallin argued that "pedagogical retardation" depended on many factors other than intelligence, such as chronic health conditions, attendance, poor nutrition), that was part of the rationale for psychological evaluation. Only with examination and application of trained clinical judgment could those children with true feeble-mindedness be separated from the backward or otherwise delayed.

Wallin's proliferation of educational classifications suggests that one of the most important roles claimed by this emerging class of school-based psychologists was that of clinical assessment of children who were not succeeding in school. One of the connections that Wallin and other school-based psychologists had with the institution-

based psychologists such as Goddard, Doll, and Kuhlman was a shared enthusiasm for the “Galtonian turn” (Danziger 1990, 77) taken by psychology in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Wallin and his colleagues wanted to build on this statistical foundation by emphasizing the need for careful individual assessment (Danziger 1990, 110). There was a clear assertion that only highly trained clinicians could accurately assess which children were feeble-minded, which were backward, and which were merely pedagogically retarded. Indeed, Wallin complained that Goddard and others at the Vineland Training School in New Jersey were careless in their training of special education teachers to suggest that simple administration of the Binet test was enough to identify accurately those children who were truly feeble-minded or “merely” backward. Instead, he said, a nationwide system of psycho-education clinics like the one he was running must be established to serve as “clearing houses” (Wallin 1915, 116) for the diagnosis and registration of the feeble-minded. Most importantly, these clinics must be staffed by highly trained and highly paid clinical psychologists. The challenge was too critical and the training needed too advanced to be left to teachers who were little more than “mere binet testers” (Wallin 1917, 119). “This work cannot be done by the army of amateurs who are invading the precincts of psycho-diagnosis. (Wallin 1917, 111). For Wallin, the importance of expert judgment available only through clinical psychologists was to meet the primary

obligation of society to identify and register as early as possible all feeble-minded children born into the state. . . . There is no more important problem in present-day constructivist social economics than the development of a state-wide and nation-wide policy for the compulsory



official identification and registration of feeble-minded children. ( 115-116)

What emerges in the discussion of Wallin and other psychologists in this period was that while trained clinical judgment was necessary for accurate assessment of feeble-mindedness, it was not sufficient to avoid mistakes. The true identification of feeble-mindedness could only come with adult outcomes. Wallin found it “probable” that “some of the cases diagnosed as high-grade feeble-minded will eventually prove by their ability to lead an independent existence, which, ultimately, is the one crucial test of feeble-mindedness, that they are border-line or backward” (Wallin 1918, 590). Feeble-mindedness is defined as incurable failure to live independently. So, should a feeble-minded student go on to an independent adulthood, then, by definition, there was a misdiagnosis.

However, within these broad categories, the professionals attached to what would now be called school psychology were active at elaborating increasingly complicated diagnostic classifications for children thought to need some form of special education. By 1914, J. E. Wallace Wallin was the first director of the Psycho-Educational Clinic for the St. Louis schools. For the next seven years in that position he was tireless in promulgating the importance of careful assessment and precise diagnosis of school children by a properly trained clinical psychologist (such as himself).

In one of his first reports to the School Board, Wallin presented his summary of the status and needs of the special education services in St. Louis. First, he noted that it was now “generally recognized” that “feeble-minded pupils” should not be left in regular classrooms. They should, at least, be moved to separate classes or, as St. Louis practiced,

in separate schools (Wallin 1914/15, 133). He acknowledged the ambiguity of some cases and allowed that “seriously backward” children might also be placed in separate schools, at least temporarily. For Wallin, there was an entirely different group of children who belonged in ungraded classes located within the regular schools. He identified three large groups as identifiable by properly trained experts (Wallin 1914/15):

1. *Restoration Cases*: “good children of good mentality who are pedagogically retarded for various reasons, such as late entrance, frequent transfers, frequent absence, serious illness, indifference or lack of application. With children of this type the problem is to provide coaching . . .so that they may be returned as soon as possible to the regular grades.” ( 138)
2. *Backward Cases*: This category “refers to pupils who are not only pedagogically but also genuinely mentally deficient. The children, while not feeble-minded, are so lacking in mental strength that it is only rarely that they can be restored to the regular grades.” ( 138).
3. *Borderline Cases*: “Pupils who at the time of assignment cannot with certainty be diagnosed as feeble-minded. Such pupils should be given the benefit of the doubt.” ( 139)

### **Overcoming Parental Resistance**

The final theme that the superintendents and psychologists played out for the special schools and classes was their portrayal of such programs as a useful mechanism for overcoming parental resistance both to the labeling of their children as feeble-minded and to their removal to institutions for permanent care.

Indeed, the clearinghouse function already described was often joined to this purpose of parental persuasion. The special school, it seems, could be presented to parents as a less stigmatizing, less disruptive stage of professional intervention, which could then gradually transition into permanent institutionalization.

One example of the fear of such parental resistance can be found in the earliest days of special class formation in Boston. In a presentation to institutional superintendents about these classes, David Lincoln specifically mentioned how efforts were actually made to keep the advent of the classes something of a secret. The worry was that too much public conversation by professionals about the extent of the “problem” would just increase resistance from the parents who found their children as targets of such campaigns.

No appeal has been made to the public; the formation of a ‘movement’ has been rather deprecated from the feeling that unguarded statements easily might be made which could be misunderstood by the parents, and might awaken feelings of mistrust (Lincoln 1902/03, 85).

In the discussion following the presentation of Lincoln’s paper, Alexander Johnson from the institution in Indiana agrees whole-heartedly with both ends of the problem. First, these defective children must be separated from their families and prepared for removal to the institution (the clearinghouse idea), but also care must be taken not to be too straightforward with the families.

There is no one so ill-fitted to train a backward child as the parent.

. . . We cannot get away from the unpleasant reflections which

follow the use of the word imbecile. It is very difficult for parents to realize that their child is feeble-minded (Johnson, cited in Lincoln 1902/03, 90)

The strategy was not just to use the special school as an intermediate stage of custody, situated to postpone and, it was hoped, avoid altogether the parental resistance to later institutional placement. There was also the matter of avoiding offensive labels, as Johnson suggests, such as ‘feeble-minded’. Indeed, despite efforts of people like Wallin to develop elaborate distinctions and subcategories between truly feeble-minded and “merely backward,” it was also readily acknowledged that the new terms were less offensive to the parents. Elizabeth Farrell cites an account of Detroit’s ungraded classes as justified by more than simple educational appropriateness:

The present method [of labeling children as backward and putting them in ungraded classes], however, has its advantages in that there is less opposition to the segregation of feebleminded children where all are classes as backward than there would be if these unfortunate children were placed in a room known to be maintained for the express purpose of caring for mentally defective children. (cited in Farrell 1914b, 59)

Some psychologists, however, thought that defending ungraded classes over separate schools on this basis was a mistake. Goddard, for example, argued instead that the prospect of family resistance was often overblown because parents “can easily be convinced” that separate school was the most advantageous

placement for their troublesome children. “In such schools the defective children are away from the normal children and escape the bullying and teasing to which they are liable (Goddard 1923, 66).

For his part, Wallin recounts in his memoirs (1955) an episode at the beginning of his term in St. Louis. According to Wallin, Superintendent Blewitt called him to a meeting soon after his arrival in 1915. Blewitt reported that the the supervisor of the separate schools (a woman named Kate Cunningham) felt that “unteachable institutional cases” were being admitted to her ‘classes’, leading to dissatisfaction among the teachers. Of course, Wallin himself was consistent in arguing that “idiots” should be excluded as well. In this case, however, Wallin felt that the proposed cut-off point was being set too high and that Blewitt would be faced with an untenable dilemma. On the one hand,

It would be manifestly illogical and absurd to refuse to admit the children into the special classes specifically established for them but to allow them to remain in the regular grades, which was [Blewitt’s] proposition. On the other hand, to exclude all seriously retarded children with less than a six year mentality or a first grade competency level would mean the exclusion of a large percentage of the candidates for the special classes and would result in violent repercussions from the parents of the excluded children and possibly from their political representatives. (Wallin 1955, 137)

For Wallin, the lesson of the episode was that the wrath of parents would descend upon any administrator who refused to follow the placement recommendations of the psychologists instead of the teachers. He reports that his predictions proved

true and that Blewitt relented within a year to the protests of “infuriated parents” (137).

### **Conclusion**

The emergence of special education can be framed as more than a response to increasingly diverse students showing up in schools as a result of the enforcement of compulsory attendance laws. It also goes beyond a response by educational administrators to elaborate bureaucratic control through increasingly specialized programming and placements. It is also important to see this creation of the continuum in special education as part of an understandable effort by clinical psychologists inside and outside the schools and institutions to legitimize their professional and bureaucratic control of the mentally subnormal population. In many respects, the experience of this population of feeble-minded children resembles that of other marginalized groups in the Progressive era. In the various examples of social control, members of emerging professions in human services played dual roles of moral entrepreneurs (Becker 1963) and clinical experts, staking their claims to administrative jurisdiction over this or that group of social misfits. What the continuum did was to create -- administratively and physically -- a pathway of placements each more fully removed than the previous one from the control of the educational system.

In interesting ways, the current debate over inclusive approaches to education for children with disabilities often revolves around the perceived merits of the same continuum that began in the first decades of the 1900s. The fundamental logic of the continuum approach is that intensity of support is matched by separateness of setting (Taylor 1988). That is, the more intensive the support needs of a particular student, then

the more separate and self-contained, institutional care on the one end to the general education classroom on the other, with varieties of special schools, self-contained classrooms, and resource programs located in between. Inclusive approaches argue, on the other hand, that the logic underlying this continuum of placements is fundamentally flawed, arguing that intensity of support does not have to be seen as directly proportional to separateness of setting. These proponents argue that even the most intensive supports for individual students can be embedded within the general education classroom or school. A continuum of support does not have to entail a continuum of placement.

However, the inclusion proponents are fighting 100 years of programs where a ‘geography of clinical practice’ has been built up along the continuum of placements in special education. Inclusion, then, can be seen from a historical perspective as a surrender of territory for those who have for decades maintained professional jurisdiction over children with intellectual disabilities (Goodley 2011; Rapley 2004). Understanding the history of how that dominion began may help us understand the vehemence with which both sides pursue the challenges today. Inclusion in this light is largely a turf war and those are the most obdurate struggles of all.

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