

How Eugenics Shaped the Logic of Disability in Education

The growing exclusion of Disabled children, and their continued segregation from mainstream schooling, are not simply contemporary policy failures. They reflect a deeper logic that became embedded in education in the early twentieth century, when disability was reframed as a biological defect and positioned as a threat to national fitness. This shift was a direct result of the rise of eugenic thinking, which gained academic legitimacy and began to shape educational policy, including teacher training. 'Eugenics', a term coined by the Victorian polymath Francis Galton in 1883, was defined as the science of improving the human population through selective breeding (positive eugenics) and discouraging procreation among those considered 'unfit' through segregation and sterilisation (negative eugenics). Galton's premise was that impairments and negative characteristics such as criminality, drunkenness and limited intelligence capacity were innate and fixed. Over two decades later, in 1904, he redefined eugenics as 'the study of all agencies that may improve or impair racial qualities', which positioned eugenics as providing scientific solutions to social problems.¹ This broadened its appeal among social reformers of all political persuasions concerned with the survival and 'fitness' of the nation and empire. Its influence on education policy was particularly evident in the training of teachers, where eugenic ideas of national improvement and racial quality were embedded in both curriculum and professional standards. These ideas were explicitly tied to the notion of 'civic worth', understood as a combination of moral character, physical fitness and biological health.² Civic worth became increasingly entangled with emerging discourse on disability and national efficiency, as studies were conducted to demonstrate a growing number of mental and moral 'degenerates' among the lower classes, and a rise in the number of 'feeble-minded' children born to them.³ This was, in effect, a hierarchy of human worth positioned as a threat to social progress, which began to shape educational thinking and teacher training.

The introduction of medical inspections in schools in 1907 marked a turning point, for they were described by one medic writing in *The Lancet* as 'one part of a larger eugenic survey of the nation'.⁴ By 1909, the committed eugenicist Cyril Burt had devised his intelligence scales or 'mental footrule', adapting the tests developed by Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon for use in the Parisian education system, and combining them with new statistical measures. Shortly afterwards, the first eugenic piece of legislation, the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913, was passed. It aimed to 'stem the great evil of feeble mindedness', an elastic and ill-defined term that enabled authorities to target individuals from the lower classes who were considered to be 'morally degenerate' or 'socially inefficient' and to forcefully segregate them. Those labelled 'idiots' or 'imbeciles', both crude and reductive labels for those with learning difficulties, were removed from their homes and incarcerated in 'colonies',⁵ where they learnt only manual skills as the authorities maintained that 'people who do not live in

society, do not need the tools of society'.⁶ Many of them were young people convicted of petty crimes, unmarried mothers and pregnant teenagers.⁷ In parallel, some 12,000 'defective' children were put in special schools.⁸

In 1913, Burt became the first educational psychologist to work for a Local Education Authority, the London County Council (LCC). Here, he had access to the files, including medical records and family histories, of all schoolchildren. He used his tests, administered with the help of classroom teachers and school inspectors, to rank and sort children into categories determined by age and ability, or intelligence, classifying them into gifted, normal and subnormal children. These tests, however, were culturally biased towards the middle-classes, and they ignored the socio-economic backgrounds of children, which would have affected their overall development, as well as their creativity.⁹ They were also viewed by teacher trainers and policymakers as a way to establish a science of education through research in intelligence testing, which would both raise the profile of education in universities and elevate the status of teachers. Despite these fundamental flaws, intelligence testing gained acceptance. As the Chief Education Officer for the LCC claimed, they would 'lift the practice of teaching, ... lay it on a broad scientific foundation ... [and] show the world that the teaching profession was a learned one'.¹⁰

In 1924, Burt was appointed lecturer in educational psychology and Head of the Higher Degrees Department at the prestigious teacher training institution, the London Day Training College (LDTC), which was linked to the University of London, whose Senate had formally accepted eugenics as a science in 1904. By this time, Burt had published his report on *Mental and Scholastic Tests* (1921), which he argued would help to identify the 'subnormal' child. Trainee teachers, who had previously been taught to observe the child to determine their educational needs, were now instructed on how to use the tests as they provided a supposedly scientific and objective means of determining intelligence and identifying subnormality. In *The Young Delinquent* (1925), Burt conflated disability with diseases, morality and criminality, resulting in many children with health conditions being misdiagnosed and permanently labelled as 'dull', 'backward', 'maladjusted' and 'ineducable'.¹¹ The labels functioned not as diagnostic categories but as instruments for social exclusion, reducing children's life chances in significant ways.¹² His writings framed the dull mind as mechanistic and the intelligent mind as logical, ignoring the multifaceted nature of cognitive abilities. Further, he consistently downplayed environmental conditions, despite his own figures showing a high correlation between poverty, environment and test scores. This selective interpretation of data exemplified confirmation bias inherent to eugenic research methodology. This flawed methodology became embedded in educational assessment practices. From the mid-1920s onwards, the tests were used to justify a reorganisation of schools and the sorting of children by age and ability, becoming increasingly tied to the concept of 'equality of opportunity' or merit. In reality, they

entrenched exclusion and ableism, repackaged as fairness and legitimised through the language of scientific neutrality. Burt was also involved at policy level through the Wood Report (1929), which framed disability as a social threat.

While eugenics became a silent presence in the 1930s, due to its appropriation by Nazi Germany, the dire economic situation during the Depression resulted in disability being framed as a financial liability and a social threat with renewed vigour. This was due not least to Burt's growing influence in the media¹³ and his position as Head of the Psychology Department at the University of London from 1932.¹⁴ By the end of the interwar period, around 33% of teachers were being trained in universities, embedding Burt's theories and tests into their professional practice, despite growing attention to the sociology and philosophy of education.¹⁵ When the Education Act was passed in 1944, the 11-plus examination was made compulsory and extended the eugenic logic of exclusion, particularly for Disabled children and those from Black/Global Majority backgrounds, within an attainment-focused education system.¹⁶ Recognising this history and challenging narratives of normalcy and merit are imperative if we want disability to be represented not as a deficit or deviation to be corrected, but as a dimension of human diversity that enriches society. This recognition must be reflected in policy and practice.

Endnotes

¹ Francis Galton, 'Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims', *American Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 1 (1904): 1, <https://galton.org/essays/1900-1911/galton-1904-am-journ-soc-eugenics-scope-aims.htm>.

² Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ A. F. Tredgold, 'The Feeble-Minded — a Social Danger', *The Eugenics Review* 1, no. 2 (1909): 97–104.

⁴ Quoted in: R. A. Lowe, 'Eugenacists, Doctors and Education in Britain, 1900-1939', in *Schools as Dangerous Places: A Historical Perspective*, ed. Anthony Potts and Tom O'Donoghue (Cambria Press, 2007), 285.

⁵ See: *Wasted Lives*, Documentary, directed by David Gill (BFI, 1972), 00:27, <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-wasted-lives-1972-online>; *Stolen Lives*, Documentary, directed by Jane Gabriel (Testimony films, 1994), Film, 00:26.

⁶ F.C. Pritchard, 'The History of Special Education', *History of Education Bulletin* Autumn, no. 8 (1971): 7–10, 7.

⁷ Sally Tomlinson, *A Sociology of Special Education* (Routledge, 2012), 29.

⁸ Tomlinson, *A Sociology of Special Education*, 33.

⁹ Brian Simon, *Intelligence, Psychology and Education: A Marxist Critique*, 2nd edn (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, 1978).

¹⁰ Robert Blair, 'Prefatory Memorandum by the Education Officer', in *Report by the Education Officer Submitting Three Preliminary Memoranda by Mr. Cyril Burt, M.A., Psychologist, on the Distribution and Relations of Educational Abilities* (LCC, 1917), vii–ix, <http://archive.org/details/distributionrela00burtuoft>.

¹¹ Anne Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain Since 1750: A History of Exclusion* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹² Chitty, *Eugenics, Race and Intelligence*.

¹³ R. Michael Chamarette, 'British Psychology and the Media: Cyril Burt at the BBC', *History & Philosophy of Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2022): 11–20.

¹⁴ Cyril Burt, *The Subnormal Mind*, Heath Clark Lectures 1933 (Oxford University Press, 1935); Cyril Burt, *The Sub-Normal School-Child: The Backward Child*, 1st edn, vol. 2 (University of London Press, 1937).

¹⁵ Nazlin Bhimani, 'Teacher Training and the Silences of Eugenics and Imperialism at the London Day Training College and the Institute of Education (1918-1939)' (PhD Thesis, University College London, 2024).

¹⁶ Simon Hood et al., *History on the Loop: The Sustained Impact of School Exclusions on Black Communities* (Runnymede Trust, 2025), <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/history-on-loop>. See also the documentary: *Subnormal: A British Scandal*, directed by Lyttanya Shannon and produced by Helen Bart and Steve McQueen (Rogan Productions, 2021). The documentary shows how culturally biased tests led to a disproportionate placement of Black Caribbean children into schools for the 'educationally subnormal' in the 1960s and 1970s, revealing the persistence of eugenic logic at the intersection of race, class and disability.