
Response to the Presidential Address

A (PARTIAL) REHABILITATION OF AYRES:

Natasha Levinson
Kent State University

In "*Laggards, Morons, Human Clinkers, and Other Peculiar Kids*," Robert Osgood takes us back to a pivotal moment in the development of American public schools, a time when schools were just starting to be held accountable for seeing to it that children progressed through the system efficiently. As a result of Ayres study, which was sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation, schools were asked to find ways to reduce the numbers of "laggards" in the system by identifying and tracking the progress of children who were regarded as "overage." As Osgood notes, the "laggards" in Ayres study refers both to those children, often immigrants, who entered school late and lacked the requisite skills to be placed in the right grade for their age level as well as the "dull" and "slow" children who were held back because they had not yet developed the skills needed to move up to the next grade. Ayres regarded the problem of overage children as a sign of inefficiency, but he also worried that the phenomenon of being labeled a "laggard" would hound these children for the remainder of their lives. Something had to be done to guard their sense of self-worth. Thus, it is not just system efficiency that concerns Ayres, but also the effects of this system on children.

Osgood's paper speaks to the continuing salience of Ayres' study for our own era of accountability. As Osgood reads him, Ayres was mainly concerned with system efficiency, although Osgood rightly sees a second, more muted concern with the needs of children. Ayres' concern with system efficiency, in other words, is not without heart. But while Osgood notes that the progressive concern with accountability led to the marginalization of children with educational disabilities, he reminds us that the progressive era also was a turning point for children with special needs. The move to child-centered education extended to children with special needs precisely because this approach to education was guided by an appreciation for children's strengths, i.e. their capabilities rather than their disabilities. As Osgood portrays the progressive movement in education, the administrative progressives were on a different side of the fence when it came to children with special needs than the pedagogical progressives, who were by and large more tolerant of differences in student ability and had a broader sense of the purposes of education.

AYRES AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE LAGGARD

I read Ayres a little differently. I see within this study some seeds for thinking differently about the relationship between educational disability and schooling. On a first reading, Ayres seems to be making a case for educational standardization that doesn't leave much room for educational differentiation: the laggards must be identified and interventions put in place so that the system can run more smoothly. But a more nuanced reading suggests that Ayres understands that schools themselves have given rise to a class of students known as "laggards," and he recognizes both the devastating effect of this categorization on the students so identified and the responsibility that schools have for undoing the damage. This has salience for the politics of educational disability today.

Early on in the report, Ayres writes about the problem of children who are held back for one reason or another coming to see their age and size in relation to their peers as a "continual reproach," a source of discouragement that leads them to drop out of school as soon as they are old enough to do so.¹ The study concludes with a very moving passage on the importance of counteracting the "habit of failure" that has been inflicted on too many children by schools. These are the children, writes Ayres, who are "always a little behind physically, a little behind intellectually, a little behind in the power to do."² He calls the failure of the schools to establish in these children "the habit of success" a "tragedy."³ Ayres adds that success is not measured solely by a child's "intellectual attainment." The "habit of failure," he writes, is "not an intellectual matter at all but a moral matter."⁴ Rather than thinking that the purpose of schools is solely to help children master an academic curriculum, Ayres suggests that the purposes of schooling should be more broadly construed so as to allow each child to develop the capacities that will enable them to experience success in something. He explains:

The boys and girls coming out of school clearheaded and with good bodies, who are resolute, who are determined to do and sure that they can do, will do more for themselves and for the world than those who come out with far greater intellectual attainments, but who lack confidence, who have not established the habit of success but within whom the school has established the habit of failure.⁵

¹ Leonard P. Ayres *Laggards in Our Schools: A Study of Retardation and Elimination in City School Systems* (N.Y.: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 1909), 9.

² *Ibid.*, 220.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

To counteract this habit of failure, Ayres recommends that schools take a two-pronged approach to the problem. The schools need to do a better job of tracking student progress through the system, but they also need to look for ways to adapt the system to the needs of individual children. Ayres mentions three ways in which the school can approach the challenge of teaching children who learn at different rates: they can develop a more flexible approach to student promotion by allowing “laggardly” students to repeat only 6 months of a grade. Quicker students would also benefit from this flexibility. They would be allowed to move up after 6 months, provided they have mastered the necessary content. This is very interesting in that it suggests that Ayres was less “normalizing” than might be thought.

While he thought that most students should progress at the standard rate of one grade per year, he recognized a need for variation on either end of the learning spectrum. More familiar to us is his second recommendation of staffing each classroom with two or three teachers to make it possible for teachers to adapt the curriculum to various ability groups. Finally, and most cost effective, children can be grouped by ability within a single grade, the slower students learning a little less and the brighter ones a little more, according to their ability and the demands of the particular course of study.⁶ We see here a strong case being made for “the system” adapting to the educational needs of particular students. Ayres insists that “it is the duty of the school to find the child, not of the child to discover the school.”⁷ The school must make it possible for each child to succeed in some way, even if this means loosening the curriculum so as to make it possible for all students to learn a little about the “essentials,” although Ayres notes the difficulty of reaching agreement about the makeup of an “essential” curriculum.⁸

Osgood notes the limits of the category of “laggard,” which did not extend to all school aged children but only to those deemed “educable” by the standards of the day. Prior to the progressives, this group was quite narrowly construed. To be educated meant to master at least the rudiments of an academic curriculum. Indeed, it is only when schools start to loosen the academic curriculum that it becomes possible to think about including children with educational disabilities in “regular” schools. Thus, at the same time as the categories of ability and disability invoked and reproduced by Ayres creates a new subset of educational exclusions, recognizing the range of abilities in children also lays the foundation for a more inclusive approach to education. Attending to the educational needs of “laggards” opened up possibilities for children whose strengths are not particularly “academic” to succeed in school.

⁶ See in Ayres the chapter entitled “Remedial Measures—Legislative and Administrative,” 185-200.

⁷ Ayres, 199.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

Ayres is particularly interesting on the subject of what constitutes an educational defect, i.e. a disability that will interfere with a child's ability to make progress in school. One of the more surprising findings of surveys comparing features of "laggards" with features of "normal children" at the time he wrote his report is that the laggards often suffer from fewer "defects" (mainly hearing and vision) than their counterparts. In other words, Ayres recognizes that their lack of progress could not be put down to a disability in the child but must instead be understood as a structural problem within the school itself. Put simply, the schools were producing laggards, and the schools could take steps to better scaffold them through the system.

Ayres goes on to state that the physical "defects" to which laggards are prone are more likely to be symptoms of impoverished living conditions. With the right social interventions in schools themselves—hygiene, nutrition, school doctors—these "defects" could be overcome.⁹ In one sense, this insistence that the laggards are not mentally defective confirms Osgood's suspicions that the laggards are educationally salvageable because they are not "feeble-minded." In other words, for all their problems, laggards in schools have a degree of educational potential that these other categories of children were not thought to have. But in another sense, Ayres' concerns about what counts as an educational disability are prescient and show his attentiveness to the fungibility of the categories of educational disability as well as his awareness that the problem is as likely to reside in the school as it is to lie in the child. On this view, disability is as much a systemic production as it is a problem that resides within the child.

Good progressive that he is, Ayres is convinced that a school surgeon can remedy many defects, although this is not to say that he thinks that fixing the problems in question will remedy "dullness" to which pupils with particular defects are thought to be prone (adenoids and enlarged glands feature centrally in this discussion). Ayres here echoes the prejudices of his age, although to his credit, in the course of this discussion, he notes that despite the ambitious claims of social scientists who think that they can predict almost to the decimal the effects of certain "defects" on educational ability, the correlation between particular physical defects and educational ability has not been conclusively demonstrated. This is not because the statistical tools have not yet been sufficiently developed; it is because they will always be too blunt an instrument for understanding the complex interplay of disability and schooling. Thus, Ayres admonishes readers not to put too much weight on statistical measures of intelligence: "The old fashioned virtues of industry, application, intelligence and regularity still hold sway, and among the reasons for poor scholarship are

⁹ Ibid., 131.

still to be found such old standbys as age upon starting, absence, laziness and stupidity.”¹⁰

Ayres takes his critique of the overblown claims of statisticians and social scientists still further when he reminds readers not to think that the cause of school failure always resides in the child. The school also plays a part in the creation of the problem. He notes that success in school is not always a sign of intelligence, “It may often be but an indication of adaptability and docility.” Indeed, in words that foreshadow studies like the one undertaken by Michelle Fine on school dropouts, Ayres contends that some of the brightest students with the broadest array of outside interests may do badly in school because they cannot adjust to the “rigid discipline of the school.”¹¹

RECOGNIZING THE NEW MOMENT IN EDUCATION

As my reading of *Laggards in Our Schools* attempts to show, Ayres was concerned about the ways in which schools contribute to the creation of the category of the “laggard,” and he advocated for ways in which schools could be restructured so as to make the category of the laggard less debilitating. True, he was motivated largely by a commitment to institutional efficiency, but this emphasis was not to the detriment of students. If anything, he wanted to bring the two concerns together. Although his analysis does not do away with disabling categorizations—he does believe that some “defects” interfere with a student’s capacity for educational attainment—he leaves room for the possibility that some characteristics that were widely considered to be unalterable defects at the time were in fact reflections of social conditions rather than fixed and unchanging attributes of individuals. He also reminds us, in the residual spirit of the Puritans, that social and even biological conditions do not sufficiently explain educational success or failure. Effort matters as much as ability.¹² At the risk of making Ayres sound like a proto-social constructionist, his report does as much to dislodge conceptions of educational disability as it does to reinforce them.

Although it is true that Ayres is not talking here about all children with special needs, but about a more particular subset of children with educational disabilities, his arguments have a great deal to contribute to our understanding of the politics of educational disability. In “The Hunt for Disability: The New

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 130. See also Michelle Fine *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School* (NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

¹² Although, in a move that shocks our contemporary sensibility, Ayres also holds out the one explanation for poor school performance with which we modern progressives find most jarring: stupidity, i.e. the possibility that a child’s lack of success in schools is neither a mark of “disability” nor a reflection of how much effort they put into their endeavors. Stupidity indicates Ayres’ attunement to human limitations rather than the notion of boundless perfectibility or at least, improvement that we usually associate with

Eugenics and the Normalization of School Children,” Bernadette Baker explains what is gained by shifting from notions of disability *per se* to a more structurally attuned notion of educational disabilities. She explains that “a preferred style or way of learning” becomes a *learning disability* only when it rubs up against an institutional structure which values one way of doing things in a limited timeframe. The same thing applies to the category of “emotional disturbance,” which, she writes, “really raises the question of what counts as an emotion and what constitutes a disturbance and to whom.”¹³ It is not that Baker is saying that there is no such thing as learning disabilities or behavior disorders, but that the *context*—i.e. the school—requires as much interrogation and intervention as the *person* with the diagnosis.

This is very much in the spirit of Leonard P. Ayres. But Ayres was writing at a different time in which identities of disability were just beginning to consolidate and could still be called into question. Writing at a different time when discourses of disability, like discourses of schooling are at once more difficult to unsettle and more prone to proliferate, Baker recognizes that her pragmatic stance poses a problem for school children diagnosed with disabilities, not to mention their families. This is partly because schools seem to be impervious to calls for deep structural change, but it is mostly because the disability feels real to the individuals who “have” them. Although her article is sharply critical of the proliferation of disabilities in schools—she regards them as evidence of a “new eugenics”—she suggests that parents of children with educational disabilities take their cues from the disability rights movement by pressing for services out of “recognition and recompense” for the narrow ways in which institutions are structured rather than concluding that the problem lies within the child.¹⁴

Historical analyses are helpful here precisely because they help us locate moments in time when the meaning of particular traits, such as being labeled a slow learner or a “laggard,” change. The point is not to reconcile us to these new developments in schools and society but to examine how, when and why they came about, to hold open the possibility that both the new identities and the (dis)abling conditions that gave rise to them might be reconfigured. By taking us back to *Laggards in Our Schools* 100 years after its publication, Bob Osgood has presented us with one such pivotal moment. In the process he has also shown us the kind of contribution that philosophers of education can make to our understanding of the production of educational disabilities in schools, and to the challenges of undoing the damage.

¹³ Bernadette Baker, “The Hunt for Disability: The New Eugenics and the Normalization of Schoolchildren,” *Teachers College Record* 104:4 (June 2002), 685.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 690.