


EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

# Politics, Place, and Perspectives in Education History

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It would be unthinkable today to deny appropriate accommodations to students with disabilities. Prior to 1975, however, it was commonplace to do so. What changed? Eventually, people's minds did. But first came a shift in the law. Nearly a century and a half after Massachusetts created the first public education system in the United States, Congress finally required all schools to provide equal access regardless of disability.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which in 1990 was revised and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), turns fifty this year. And it represents an important milestone. Today, young people in the US are guaranteed a free and appropriate education, in the most inclusive possible way. It doesn't always happen without a struggle; but the systematic exclusion of young people with disabilities is a thing of the past.

Why do people adopt new ideas about how schools should operate? One obvious answer, at least on this important anniversary, is that the law often compels it. Yet, as Scott Gelber explains in "From Compensation to Accommodation: The History of Learning Disabilities in American Higher Education," it isn't *only* the law that changes. In his article, Gelber looks at the evolution of college and university practices, from the introduction of the concept of learning disabilities through the establishment of standard supports and accommodations. As he finds, institutions of higher education changed their practices in response to legal and institutional pressures. But what eventually emerged were what today might be framed as "pillars of competent instruction." The law changed, but so did the way educators think about their practice.

This theme—the evolution of thinking about educational practice—continues across the other articles in this issue, even if they don't address the issue of disability.

In "Sustaining the Movement: Community Care and Collaboration at the Highlander Nursery School, 1938-1953," Briana M. Bivens unearths the history of Highlander's no-cost early care program. As she argues, the Highlander Nursery School, run from 1938 to 1953, functioned as a "depoliticized entry point" for families not inclined toward a pro-union and pro-civil rights position. Her article helps us understand the dynamics of bottom-up political and social change through a school

community, highlighting an important counterpoint to the kind of top-down change enacted through IDEA.

Turning the focus to a different century and a different part of the country, Isaac Calvert, LeGrand Richards, and Jessica Ashcraft examine the spread of progressive educational ideas in the Utah Territory. In “Examining ‘The Mormon Puzzle’: Progressive Education and Mormon Educational Ideas in Late Nineteenth-Century Utah,” the authors explore the intersection of religious, educational, and regional values. This study captures a process that stands in contrast to the standardizing impact of national legislation like IDEA; ideas can migrate from one context to another and can be received, interpreted, and reinvented according to place and community.

In “Transnational Knowledge Circulation and the Closing of Minds to Progressive Education Influences on Schooling in the First Decade of Independence in Ireland,” Thomas Walsh and Tom O’Donoghue look not at the *adoption of* progressive educational ideas, but at *resistance to* such ideas. As they argue, the conservative Catholicism of the new nation, as well as its nationalist ethos, kept progressive educational ideas from taking root. Political and religious values stymied the migration of ideas, placing attention once again on the importance of place, community, and nationalist sentiment.

Finally, Bruce Kimball and Robert Toutkoushian bring the issue to a close with a Policy Dialogue on “Researchable Questions in History and Economics of Higher Education.” They turn our attention to approaches taken by scholars interested in the challenges facing US colleges and universities. Their discussion is situated in the context of ever-increasing tuition costs and wavering public support for higher education, and they explore a range of topics from their specific disciplinary perspectives.

As we pen this introduction, more change is afoot. Donald Trump has won election to the White House, and his party has taken control of the US Senate and the House of Representatives. Moreover, Trump’s campaign promise to shutter the US Department of Education highlights an important shift in public mindset. Decentralizing and defunding federal initiatives in education have long been talking points among conservatives, but delivering on those priorities will have direct implications on education rights and opportunities—including those for students with disabilities. If history offers any guide, it’s that the pendulum will swing, and hard, away from the past and toward a new era defined by this presidency. But as historians also know all too well, the pendulum will swing again; no victory is ever final.