



ELIZABETH FARRELL



and the History of Special Education

2nd Edition

Kimberly Kode



On August 10, 1922, eighteen students at Teachers College in the summer session decided that the next step in special education was fellowship, that they ought to get together, and know what the other is doing. This International Council ... is vigorous and strong: it is to be reckoned with in educational programs in this country.

When you hear of ability groupings, you can look back to a small group of people who, before the term was in general use, were talking about the desirability of teaching children what they could learn, developing their powers, instead of emphasizing their deficiencies. We did that ... before any school group had ever dreamed of it.

Now, my last work. The jails are full of your failures—all of you. Your state didn't ask you to be a teacher. You came and offered yourself as a teacher. And I want to challenge the right of any person to be a teacher of another unless that person will exhaust every resource to be a better and better teacher. If these men in jail—and the women, too—had had the kind of teachers that this government expected them to have, I question whether the jails would be full. I am aware that there is subnormality, psychotic conditions, poverty, and what not. But one of the greatest reasons is the lack of right educational opportunity.

I want every teacher here to think now of her failures, of the men and the women whose lives were cut short in their opportunity, because we were not well-trained enough, because the science of education was not an instrument in our hands. How many people are less than they should be because we lack the artistry of creating interest, because we lack the artistry of making attractive the knowledge of the world?

As we consecrate again, this moment, our lives to the education of this country, let us say with Wells "It is a race between destruction and education." I am a teacher, and destruction shall never win.

- Elizabeth E. Farrell
(1930)





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Introduction

History balances the frustration of “how far we have to go” with the satisfaction of “how far we have come.” It teaches tolerance for the human shortcomings and imperfections, which are not uniquely of our generation, but of all time.

Lewis F. Powell, Jr.
(as cited in Peter, 1977, p. 247)

Reflecting on the history of education, and, more specifically, the history of special education, it is easy to feel self-satisfied with the improvements in the treatment and education of people with disabilities made over the past 50 years or so. The passage of Public Law 94-142 (the Education of All Handicapped Children Act) and Public Law 101-336 (the Americans with Disabilities Act) at the end of the 20th century served to focus the country and its citizens on the rights and needs of people with disabilities. Reauthorization of these laws (as the Individuals with Disabilities Act and the ADA Amendments Act), combined with landmark court cases since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)—such as *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972), *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972), and *Hudson v. Rowley* (1982)—did much to ensure that people with disabilities are treated with dignity and respect. Today, the majority of students with disabilities are educated alongside their typically developing peers for most of their school day; the principles of universal design (enabling physical access) have influenced efforts to ensure that these students have equal access to all elements of the educational experience.

CHAPTER 1

The Early Years

Over 2.5 million immigrants arrived in America between 1840 and 1850 (Carpenter, 1927, as cited in Yans-McLaughlin & Lightman, 1997, pp. 324–325)—and Elizabeth Farrell’s parents were among them. Unlike many immigrants of the time, however, Elizabeth’s parents had a head start on their future. Skilled in the textile industry, the Farrell family was able to overcome many of the difficulties that faced strangers in a foreign land and achieve financial security and economic success. Despite these achievements, they could not have foreseen the impact their daughter would later have on the education of millions of children throughout the United States.

Michael Farrell, Elizabeth’s father, arrived in America from Kilkenny, Ireland in 1848 when he was 13 years old. The Farrell family settled in Catskill, New York, at the foot of the Catskill Mountains, a village made famous in 1800 by Washington Irving as the scene of Rip Van Winkle’s legendary nap. Although what led the Farrell family to settle in Catskill is largely unknown, travel to that region was fairly easy, made so by the establishment of a regular steamboat route in 1838 up the Hudson River from New York City. Further, the water power of the Hudson River combined with the completion of the Susquehanna Turnpike in 1800 led to the development of a variety of industries in the area: tanneries, gristmills, sawmills, papermills, and woolen mills (Adams, 1990, p. 15).

Elizabeth Farrell’s mother, Mary Smith, also immigrated to the United States as a child. Born in Wales in 1838, she was the second oldest of six children, with her two youngest siblings born after the family arrived in the United States. Her family settled in Marcellus, New York, a small village in central New York State that served as home to several different woolen mills.



CHAPTER 2

An Evolving Practice

In his 1905 *Seventh Annual Report to the Board of Education*, Superintendent William H. Maxwell declared that the time of experiment is now ended—the ungraded classes have fully justified their existence—and for the future there remains ... the wide extension of this system” (p. 113). The Board of Education, with Superintendent Maxwell as its driving force, officially sanctioned the ungraded class program on February 14, 1906, and appointed Elizabeth Farrell Inspector of the Ungraded Class Department. With that designation, New York City became the first American city where this type of program was one person’s sole responsibility. Reporting directly to the Board of Superintendents, Farrell had an extensive list of duties, including supervising the existing ungraded classes, aiding in the formation of new classes, cooperating in the examinations of children proposed for admittance to or removal from ungraded classes, assigning pupils, training teachers for these classes, and recommending teachers for leaves of absence to study approaches to serving this population of individuals.

To provide both Farrell and school principals a framework from which to operate, Maxwell issued several instructions regarding the special classes. Maxwell left the exact subject matter largely up to the school principals, but stressed that the students be taught practical skills (for girls, sewing and cooking; for boys, woodworking and use of tools). Further, Maxwell encouraged principals to obtain qualified individuals to lead these unique classes:

The teacher who is to take up this work should be peculiarly adapted to it by nature. She should have insight into child nature, affection for children, and ability for leadership. She should be resourceful and inventive, reaching and quickening the spirit

CHAPTER 3

Shaping the Profession



In her role as Inspector of the Department of Ungraded Classes, Elizabeth Farrell faced many of the same issues that special education directors and administrators deal with today. Perhaps most critical among them was the shortage of qualified teachers to meet the demands of the number of ungraded classes required in the public schools throughout New York City. As head of the department it was considered one of Farrell's chief duties to find those teachers who had a natural aptitude for working in the ungraded classroom.

It was no easy task. Every year the number of ungraded classes throughout the school district grew. In 1906, when Farrell became Inspector of the Ungraded Department, there were only 14 classes; 15 years later there were over 250 (Farrell, 1921, p. 78). To assist Farrell in identifying additional ungraded teachers, the Board of Examiners began to conduct competitive examinations. These exams were open to women with at least 3 years teaching experience, as well as teachers in private schools and school districts outside of New York City. The examination consisted of three parts: written, oral, and practical. The written portion included two papers, one on the methods of ungraded instruction and the other on principles of education. The practical exam consisted of skill demonstration in such areas as basketry, piano playing, drawing, and sewing. The oral exam was a practicum of sorts, where the candidate was put in charge of an ungraded class in order to observe her use of the English language and her classroom management ability. If the applicant did not hold a regular license to teach in the New York City public school system, a certificate of physical fitness, along with proof of vaccinations and citizenship was required.



Epilogue

Kimberly Kode's welcome update and expansion of *Elizabeth Farrell and the History of Special Education* is important for contemporary special educators, psychologists and diagnosticians, school administrators, and historians focused on the history of disability for a number of reasons. Reading this new edition, one is struck with how contemporary some of the ideas and issues that emerged in the opening decades of the 20th century feel 100 years later. Consider these quotes from the Introductory chapter; aren't they as relevant today as they were in the early 1900s?

Farrell sought to adopt a similar methodological procedure of examination and record-keeping—but one that was not differentiated by separate programs, separate facilities, and separate schools, believing such a policy would stigmatize and isolate students with special education needs.

Similarly, Farrell advocated for a well-rounded assessment of student's abilities, rather than a reliance on intelligence testing as the single measure for placement of a child in the ungraded class.

Farrell's progressive nature is best reflected, I think, in her entanglement with Henry Herbert Goddard, the psychologist and mental testing pioneer who introduced the Binet-Simon test to an American audience and proceeded to try to establish it as the means to classify and, essentially, segregate people who were then deemed to be "feeble-minded." Goddard's story is fairly well known, and my colleague David Smith and I have written about it extensively in our book *Good Blood, Bad Blood: Science, Nature, and the Myth of the Kallikaks* (Smith & Wehmeyer, 2012). As *Elizabeth Farrell and the History of Special Education* effectively relates, Farrell took