

1

Learning Difficulties and the American Public School: A Conceptual Framework

During early February of 1974, the *Minneapolis Tribune* published a short reminiscence by Otto Friedrich concerning an incident that occurred some thirty-five years earlier when he was a sixth grader at Green Street School in Brattleboro, Vermont. His teacher, Mrs. Forbes, was a stern and demanding woman who routinely implored her students to exert all their effort and who thought nothing of admonishing or flunking those children who did not live up to her expectations. No one that year, Friedrich reported, felt her wrath more strongly than did a new student, George Grass. George, as Friedrich put it, was “a little slow” or “not quite right.” He was a child who today, according to Friedrich, would be placed in a special class. There were, however, no such classes in Vermont in 1940, and so, he was sent to Mrs. Forbes’s class. Mrs. Forbes assigned George to a seat in the rear of the room, a place she reserved for her less able students.

During his second week in class, Mrs. Forbes gave a history test, which George did not pass. George in fact, as Friedrich recalled, wrote the same answer, “vegetables,” for each question. The next day, after returning the tests to everybody except George, Mrs. Forbes proceeded to read his test to the entire class:

"Listen to this," Mrs. Forbes said, holding up George Grass's paper and beginning to read aloud from it. "When did the Pilgrims land at Plymouth Rock?" "Vegetables . . ." "Who was Miles Standish?" "Vegetables." "Who was Pocahontas?" "Vegetables . . ." "What happened to the witches of Salem?" "Vegetables."

The entire class, according to Friedrich, began to laugh. George, himself, began to laugh. Mrs. Forbes then stated that George would have to do better on the next test. There was, however, Friedrich concluded, no next test for George. He never returned to Green Street School again.¹

A week later, Mrs. Marvin Anderson of Cannon Falls, a small town just outside Minneapolis, wrote to the *Tribune* editor to suggest that Mrs. Forbes had not realized that George had a learning disability. "There are," she said, "many Georges in the world." Anderson then went on to describe numerous mistakes that Mrs. Forbes had made in dealing with George. Children with learning disabilities do better when asked questions in private than in front of the entire class. They do better, Anderson noted, if they can respond orally instead of in writing. Finally, Anderson stated that George would have performed better if he sat in the front of the classroom where he could more easily attend to the teacher. Anderson ended her letter by asking, "What are we as parents and our schools doing for George?"²

During the almost four decades that separate the Vermont of Otto Friedrich's youth from Mrs. Anderson's Minneapolis, our view of children such as George Grass has undergone a major transformation. A child who in 1940 was thought of as being intellectually slow and was virtually driven from school by the teacher's ridicule would by the end of the 1960s be seen as learning disabled and deserving of not only compassion and understanding but special education. The purpose of this volume is to recount the events surrounding this change, to explain why have they occurred, and to consider how they have affected the nation's public schools.

The story that I will tell in this book is of more than

antiquarian interest. During the last several years, educators have begun to talk about the need to alter the public school's curricular and instructional programs to accommodate a host of children who they describe as being at-risk of school failure. Although these efforts seem to be just getting underway, the kinds of reforms that are being promoted for these children are quite similar to the special class that Friedrich mentioned and the instructional modifications to which Anderson referred.³

The events that transformed students such as George Grass from being "a little slow" to learning disabled can be seen as the first attempt by school reformers to accommodate at-risk children.⁴ Since we have already traversed the terrain of school failure earlier in this century, it may be prudent—before we embark again on this endeavor—to consider the initial efforts of America's public schools to accommodate children with learning difficulties.

The place of history in exploring educational policy-making is at best uncertain. We should no doubt like to believe that if we study earlier instances of school reform, we can identify our past mistakes and avoid making them again. Yet, as Emile Durkheim warned us at the beginning of this century, a knowledge of past lapses may not enable us to avoid making similar mistakes in the future. "Since the realm of error," as he put it, "knows no bounds, error itself can appear in an infinite variety of forms."⁵

Nonetheless, exploring the history of this brand of school reform may prove valuable. One of the detriments of studying familiar and commonplace events and issues, Durkheim reminds us, is that we tend to assume a certain inevitability about how things will turn out. Contemporary studies of at-risk children often assume that existing programs of remedial and special education represent the best ways of teaching children with learning difficulties. Examining past efforts at educating children who were difficult to teach will lead us to confront a known problem in a less familiar setting. In this unknown territory we may find that outcomes that we have taken for granted as being inescapable can be otherwise. In other words, a study of past efforts at reforming the schools to

accommodate students with learning difficulties can lead us to see the problem of at-risk children in new and interesting ways.⁶

II.

Not unlike other educational labels, the precise meaning of the term *at-risk* is difficult to pin down. Some educators argue that the at-risk label represents the latest in a line of terms that have been used to refer to children with school learning and behavior problems. They equate at-risk, then, with such other labels as *low-* or *underachievement*, *mild retardation*, and *learning disabilities*.⁷ Robert Slavin and his associates, for example, define at-risk students as those "who are presently eligible for special or compensatory education."⁸

Others see the at-risk label as constituting a departure from previous conceptions of school failure. At-risk children, they argue, can include those with high ability and those from middle- and upper middle-class families, children who were usually excluded in earlier conceptualizations of school failure. And the source of the risk, they go on to say, is just as likely to be a faulty and failed school as it is to be a deficit within the child. As Wendy Hopfenberg and her associates note, at-risk students are "those who lack the family, home, and community resources to succeed in schools *as schools are currently constituted*."⁹

The position that I hold in this book is closer to the first of these viewpoints. There are certainly differences between such categories as low-achievement, learning disabilities, and at-risk. Whereas low-achievement, for example, is a very broad label associated with learning problems of diverse origins, learning disabilities is typically used to refer to learning problems attributed to a central nervous system dysfunction. Similarly, the at-risk category includes children whose school failure is attributed to alienation, a problem that would not normally be considered a learning disability. Yet all of these labels are social constructs that educators and others have coined at various times to address a similar problem—namely,

the presence in schools of children who for a host of reasons are difficult to teach and often troublesome to manage. There is, I believe, something to be learned about current efforts to reform the schools to accommodate at-risk students from earlier attempts this century to provide for students with other labels but nonetheless in danger of failure.¹⁰

The children who we are labeling as being at-risk have been, it seems, a perennial concern of American educators. In his annual report to the Board of Trustees of Illinois' Lake View High School in June 1881, Principal A.F. Nightingale bemoaned the fact that almost sixty percent of the students who had entered the school since its opening in 1874 had failed to graduate. These students did not, he thought, possess "any inherent intellectual incapacity." Rather, they were "pushed, hurried, goaded, crammed in their preparation at the very time when their progress should be slow, steady, and sure." These students, according to Nightingale, had been able to meet the standards required for admission to Lake View. Once they were admitted, however, they were unable to "cope with the studies of the high school."¹¹

Nightingale was not alone among the educators of his day in voicing a concern about the academic and social problems that school children routinely confronted. Beginning around 1880 and continuing through the first three decades of the twentieth century, school reformers throughout the country sought, usually with the support of women's voluntary organizations or other private philanthropies, to establish an array of social services to assist children who were experiencing school-related difficulties. Among these programs were medical inspection and other health services, vocational guidance, visiting teacher services, sex and health education, vacation schools, and special schools and classes for the handicapped.¹²

Of all these early social service programs, public school special schools and classes were the forerunners of today's programs for at-risk children. Precisely when these schools and classes first appeared and for whom they were designed has been a matter of some controversy. Writing in 1900, Rhoda Esten credited the Providence, Rhode Island Public Schools with having established the first special class for so-called

backward children in 1896. A 1916 survey of education in Cleveland, Ohio, noted that the city had established a special school for delinquent boys in 1876. And Robert Kunzig reported in his 1931 U.S. Office of Education study that New York City had established a parental school for delinquent youth in 1857 and Boston had introduced a program for deaf children in 1869.¹³ Notwithstanding this difference in opinion concerning when special classes and schools were first established, the clear champions of this reform impulse were early twentieth-century Progressives.

Some of these first special schools and classes were designed for children who had such clearly defined disabilities as blindness, deafness, and orthopedic handicaps. Other programs made provision for children whose disabilities were less obvious and less clearly defined, including mental retardation, backwardness, and incorrigibility.¹⁴ Despite these differences in clientele, Progressive era school administrators had two goals in mind in promoting this reform. In his 1896 report to the Detroit Board of Education, Milton Whitney, Principal of the Truant School, saw the major contribution of his school as financial: "We are saving the city and state thousands of dollars that would have to be spent to prosecute the boys, criminals in after years, and support them in some of the state penal institutions at a cost far exceeding the amount spent in maintaining this school." Yet, the Truant School was also supposed to help children: "Besides the matter of expense, is it nothing that we save many of these boys from becoming criminals in after years?"¹⁵

Reporting to the New York City Board of Education in 1920, Superintendent William L. Ettinger noted a similar conflict in the purposes of special classes. When placed in regular classrooms, according to Ettinger, handicapped children not only failed academically but their pride and morale were undermined. In addition, their need to repeat courses and grades that they had failed brought extra expenses to the city. For Ettinger, "the proper classification and segregation of such children was therefore desirable, not only from a humanitarian, but also from an economic standpoint."¹⁶

Four years earlier, Atlanta's Superintendent of Schools,

Leonidas Landrum, expressed the conflicting purposes of special classes in somewhat different terms. Such classes would, he noted, help the regular classroom by allowing the teacher to do "more effective work with the normal children." But they would also help handicapped children who would be provided "special individual attention along lines suited to their mental growth and development."¹⁷ Difficult to teach children, then, created a dilemma for turn-of-the-century school administrators. As Milwaukee's Superintendent of Schools, C.G. Pearse, saw it, these special schools and classes would "save these children from themselves." Yet these programs, again in Pearse's words, would "save the state from the harm" that these children may bring to the schools.¹⁸

Public school special schools and classes, then, were created out of contradictory purposes. School reformers promoted these programs to minimize the financial costs associated with educating difficult to teach children as well as the educational burdens their presence in regular classrooms brought to teachers and students alike. At the same time, however, they supported these classes to supposedly help the handicapped. The different and conflicting messages that turn-of-the-century school administrators sent in defending these first special schools and classes have remained as a continuing characteristic of special education as well as other programs to accommodate children with learning problems. No feature of the attempt of educators to accommodate children who are difficult to teach has been more salient in shaping and directing these programs than has been its incongruous goals. As we explore that effort in the chapters that follow, I will pay particular attention to what these contradictory purposes tell us about this enterprise.

III.

If we are to account for the development of public school programs for children with learning difficulties, including today's at-risk students, we need at the outset to explore two distinct but, as we shall see, related issues. First, we need to

examine how turn-of-the-century school reformers came to believe that children who were difficult to teach and troublesome to manage were the responsibility of the public schools. Second, we need to explain why these educators advocated the creation of special schools and classes as the vehicle for accommodating these children.

It was not inevitable that early twentieth-century American schools would serve children with learning difficulties. It took a transformation in our thinking and discourse about deviance for this to happen. Our sense of what constitutes a deviant act would have to change from a moral lapse or simple recalcitrance to a socialization failure. And our understanding of how one responds to deviance would have to change from something akin to punishment—namely, inflicting pain or death—to a process of reintegrating the individual into society. In Western Europe, legal reformers seeking to render the system of criminal justice more efficient and enlightenment thinkers who wished to humanize and democratize political relationships began to initiate these changes in the latter years of the eighteenth century.¹⁹ In the United States, similar changes began later and were in midstream in the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century.²⁰

We can see the beginnings of this shift in the thinking of American intellectuals by examining the efforts of the founders of American sociology in the years around the turn of the twentieth century to devise a theory of social control. Such a theory, they believed, was needed to address what they saw as the increasing disorder accompanying the nation's transformation to an urban, industrial society. One of the first to try his hand at this task was Edward A. Ross. Writing in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Ross blamed the discord he saw about him on two factors, which he associated with urbanization and industrialization. First, a growing emigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, he argued, was creating a population that was increasingly diverse in ethnicity as well as in beliefs, values, and attitudes, the building blocks of social unity. Second, the demise of the rural small town meant the end of the one institution whose intimate, face-to-face relationships and like-mindedness in beliefs, had been, he maintained, the tradi-

tional guarantor of order in American society. To combat these two destabilizing events, Ross sought, as he explained in his autobiography, "the linch-pins which hold society together." Toward the end of 1894, after about four months of research, Ross went on to say, "I set down as they occurred to me thirty-three distinct means by which society controls its members. This is the gem of my social control."²¹

Modern urban society, Ross argued, lacked such inherent tendencies among individuals as sociability and sympathy, which had in an earlier day provided almost automatically for a sense of social order. To compensate for these natural mechanisms of order, twentieth-century America had, according to Ross, to develop an array of artificial restraints. Among these controls, some, including law and public opinion, operated directly and overtly through the application of sanctions, often coercive. There were, however, other kinds of controls, including education, ceremony, illusion, and ethics, to name but a few, that operated indirectly and covertly through suggestions, feelings, or judgment. Ross believed that these latter, indirect controls were the most appropriate for modern society. They had, as he saw it, the ability to regulate the internal and often hidden motivations and thoughts of individuals, the first signals of their failed socialization as well as critical elements in their ultimate redemption.²² Yet he found himself unable to explain how these controls worked. The only form of regulation for which he could account was that which occurred overtly and directly through the application of sanctions.²³

Ross, it seems, recognized the need for a theory of social control that was consistent with emerging ideas of deviance. What eluded him, however, was an understanding of the psychological mechanism that explained how control operated internally within individuals. Within a decade, however, another early American sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley, provided the missing explanation. Like Ross, Cooley was troubled by America's transition to an urban, industrialized nation. Yet he was less concerned than was Ross about the specter of social disruption. In his notion of the social self, he had identified the internal psychological element that could contain any such threats. According to Cooley, the social self emerged spontan-

ously in social interaction as those so engaged came to view themselves from a common and shared perspective. It led individuals to adopt attitudes and patterns of behavior that accorded with the norms of the social group to which they belonged.

For Cooley, then, social order was not problematic. It was the natural outcome of social interaction.²⁴ Writing in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Ross attempted but ultimately failed to articulate a theory of social control to match an emerging understanding of deviance. Early in the next century, Cooley had devised just such a theory.

A major impact of this new understanding of deviance was to extend the task of social control beyond the coercive agencies of society to its educational and medical institutions. In fact, the ultimate effect of this shift in thinking was to attenuate the distinction between correction on the one hand and education and treatment on the other. Between the late 1880s and mid-1930s, for example, specialists in the emerging field of classroom management sought to use the schools to instill children with internal mechanisms of self-discipline. As they saw it, the task of public education was to transform children from beings whose behavior was externally controlled into individuals who directed their own conduct. Individuals should act correctly because that was the right thing to do, not because they were forced. Self-control was the mechanism within the individual that brought about this right conduct voluntarily.²⁵ Writing in 1893, Emerson White likened self-control to the springs and wheels of a clock and spoke of it as constituting an "inner impulse."²⁶

These classroom management specialists saw programs of student government as an especially effective means of shifting the disciplinary locus from external authority to self-control and the motivation from coercion to voluntarism. One of the most elaborate of these early efforts was the student government program established in 1915 at Washington Junior High School in Rochester, New York. Under this program, the school was divided into fifty-two homerooms composed of thirty-five students each. Each homeroom elected five class officers: a president who served as presiding officer, a vice-

president who was the homeroom's business manager, a secretary-treasurer or usher who assisted school visitors, and a deputy in charge of homeroom discipline. Each of these homeroom officers belonged, in turn, to a group made up of his or her counterparts throughout the school, which was under the direction of a faculty advisor. The vice-presidents' group, for example, was in charge of the monthly inspection of the building for fire and sanitary hazards, while the secretary-treasurers' group was responsible for operating the student savings account program. In addition, there were four schoolwide committees composed of upper-grade students: a lunch committee, a committee of messengers, a committee of school traffic deputies, and a marshals' committee. The marshals' committee was responsible for guarding against thefts in the school cloakrooms. To improve its effectiveness, it was a secret society whose members were unknown to other students. Participating in such a program, according to the school's administration, would teach children to take responsibility for their own conduct. They would learn to regulate their behavior voluntarily without external coercion. They would be prepared to assume the kind of self-direction required of citizens in a democratic society.²⁷

Similarly, medical specialists embarked upon the work of social control. In 1909, for example, a group of prominent physicians and laypersons, including Clifford Beers, Adolph Meyer, and William Welch, established the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in an attempt to use medical knowledge, particularly psychological and psychiatric research, for the solution of current social problems.²⁸ One of the first problems that the Committee directed its attention to was that of juvenile delinquency. In 1912, Thomas Salmon, the Committee's medical director, used a portion of the proceeds of a \$50,000 grant from the philanthropist Henry Phipps to conduct a series of surveys of institutionalized dependent and delinquent children.²⁹

Ten years later, in 1922, the National Committee, with the financial support of the Commonwealth Fund, undertook a four-pronged child guidance demonstration project to prevent juvenile delinquency. First, the Bureau of Children's Guidance

was established at the New York School of Social Work. The Bureau's charge was to train psychiatric social workers and visiting teachers and to place visiting teachers in several New York City public schools where they would identify behavior-disordered students. Second, the Division on the Prevention of Delinquency was created within the Committee with the responsibility of establishing child guidance clinics in several cities. Affiliated with a juvenile court, hospital, or public school, these clinics were designed to assist local communities in addressing the behavior problems of children. Third, the Committee on Visiting Teachers was created to place and support visiting teachers in public schools throughout the country. And finally, the Joint Committee on Methods of Preventing Delinquency was established to coordinate and publicize the work of the project.³⁰

The mental hygiene movement was, as it turns out, one of the first instances of what would be the increasing participation during the next half-century of the medical community in the regulation of deviance. Such involvement is often referred to as the *medicalization of deviance*. That is, individual and social problems that had been seen as nonmedical are redefined using medical discourse and treated employing medical procedures. In time, psychiatrists, psychologists, and even ordinary physicians would assume roles once monopolized by the police and other criminologists. They would bring such techniques as group counseling, psychosurgery, behavior modification, and drug therapy to the work of penology. Under their influence, crime would come to be seen as a sickness. Criminals and other deviants, then, were not responsible for their behavior. They were individuals whose failed socialization was the result of organic or psychological defects that rendered them sick and required a therapeutic regimen if they were to be reintegrated into society.³¹

The most significant impact of this demonstration project for our purposes was that it brought this medical effort to combat deviance into the schools. The affiliation of child guidance clinics with the public schools, as was done in the Minneapolis demonstration project, provided entry into the schools for those concerned with the identification and man-

agement of childhood behavior problems. Placing visiting teachers in the schools would, in the short term, involve educators in this effort. In time, it would prepare the way for the emergence of guidance counseling and school psychology as regular school functions. The efforts of the promoters of child guidance, when taken together with those of other like-minded reformers, would serve in the long run to expand the work of the schools to include the treatment of an ever-growing category of childhood deviance, including emotional disturbance, social maladjustment, and learning disabilities.³² Their efforts, in other words, would serve to blur what has traditionally differentiated the tasks of education, therapy, and criminology.

One such body of reformers was the National Conference on the Education of Backward, Truant, and Delinquent Children. Spanning the years 1904 to 1921, the Conference, a forerunner of the National Conference of Social Work, was one of the first groups to make the case for expanding the role of the school to that of accommodating children with learning difficulties.

IV.

Turn-of-the-century American educators used the term *backward* to refer to a diverse lot of children who were not adjusting to the academic and social demands of the public schools. Sometimes, they used the term as a synonym for *mental deficiency*. More often, however, they employed the concept of backwardness to talk about intellectually normal children whose school failure was the result of environmental deficits or cognitive dysfunctions of uncertain origin.³³ It was these children who would ultimately become the learning disabled and at-risk students whom I shall consider in this volume.

Speaking at the seventh annual Conference on the Education of Backward, Truant, and Delinquent Children in 1910, Howard McQueary of Soldan High School in St. Louis noted that the salient feature of backward children was that they were intellectually normal:

By "backwardness," we refer more to school attainments than to mental status, that is our emphasis is upon failure to make regular progress in grades with the average group of children, or unbalanced accomplishments. This may be due to a great many causes, such as late entrance into school; the lockstep in promotion; frequent transfer from school to school, or from teacher to teacher, the presence of physical defects, and sickness causing irregular attendance; poor teaching; and home indulgence; in addition to mental incapacity or delayed maturity; so that there may be a general all-round retardation; or backwardness may be manifest only in some particular subject or study.³⁴

Educators who were interested in the plight of these children advanced numerous explanations for backwardness. Some believed that the problem was environmental. In his introduction to Henry Goddard's text on backward children, Paul Hanus noted that these were children "who for some cause, local, environmental, physical, or somewhat mental are slow, dull and cannot progress at the rate that our ordinary school curriculum presupposes."³⁵ At the 1909 meeting of the Conference on the Education of Backward, Truant, and Delinquent Children, Florence McNeal identified eighteen categories of backwardness, over half of which could be attributed to environmental or social causes. Included among the backward, she noted, were children who could not speak English, had poor self concepts, had unsatisfactory school attendance, had weak study skills, or could not complete their required school work.³⁶

William Bodine, Superintendent of Compulsory Education for the Chicago Public Schools, attributed increases in backwardness in his address to the 1905 meeting of the Conference to what he saw as the unwholesome characteristics of modern urban life. There was, Bodine stated, the problem of unrestricted immigration, which was allowing the entry into the country of "illiterates" and others who would make "undesirable citizens." Such individuals, he believed, would not recognize the need to send their children to school. Another factor in the increasing incidence of backwardness, Bodine believed, was the ease with which people could marry and have

children. "We forget that there is no uniform marriage law to stop the marriage of the feeble-minded, epileptics, consumptives, habitual drunkards, and school girls in short dresses who play with fate to the tune of the wedding march."

There were, Bodine argued, other aspects of modern urban life that were responsible for backwardness. They included the ready access that children living in the city had to liquor, tobacco, cocaine, and opium, the countless opportunities they had to engage in gambling, and the confinement brought about by apartment living. Even the rise of labor unions, he believed, had contributed to increases in backwardness. Students who witnessed strikes and the other organizational efforts of incipient unions, Bodine believed, acquired a disrespect for law, which frequently led to acts of disobedience and defiance in the classroom.³⁷ These were conditions, Bodine pointed out, that were unknown in the nation's rural past:

Slowly but surely, the home is passing away in the cities—the old fashioned home with its green yards and flowers, its broad porch, and comfort for child life. There are few if any neurotics among country children where they live next to nature and where they grow up into robust manhood and womanhood as nature's own.³⁸

Others, however, put forth a medical explanation for the problem and attributed backwardness to brain damage. During the discussion of his paper at the 1905 Conference on the Education of Backward, Truant, and Delinquent Children, Charles Krauskopf, Secretary of the Illinois Society for Child Study, stated that this problem was the result of children's "nervous organization." What was perplexing about these children, he went on to say, was that despite the lack of any physical defect, "some portion of the brain has not developed fully."³⁹ A member of the audience, a Dr. Abbott, noted the difficulty brought about by the inability to actually locate the brain injury:

When you come to the children that are backward, these children that are not right and we don't know exactly what to do, it is an extremely difficult problem. There may be no

defect apparent and still the child may suffer from these mental deficiencies to a greater or lesser degree.⁴⁰

Writing in 1914, Barbara Morgan took a similar position. She described backward children as those exhibiting "inherent fundamental brain disturbance," a "sense defect," or a "slow rate of development."⁴¹ And twelve years later, Annie Inskeep suggested that one of the characteristics of backwardness was word blindness, "a condition arising because of a lesion of the left or, if the patient is left-handed, the right angular gyrus or a cellular deficiency in the same region."⁴²

Notwithstanding the cause of backwardness, advocates for these children believed that the schools often exacerbated the problem. At the 1905 meeting of the Conference, Nelson McLain, Superintendent of the St. Charles School for Boys, argued that backwardness could be brought on by a school curriculum that "failed to nourish the mental growth or to engage, employ and direct the physical activities of child life."⁴³ A year later, at the 1906 meeting, William Shearer, Superintendent of Schools in Elizabeth, New Jersey, pointed to the role that the school plays in causing backwardness:

I think that it may be shown that the very large proportion (I can't say all) of the so-called backward children are not backward because of inherited mental or physical defects but are considered backward and made to appear backward because of the methods which we are using in our public schools.⁴⁴

Shearer went on to claim that for many children the existing curriculum was inappropriate. "We are stuffing the coming men and women in our school with a lot of matter which is not digestible, which cannot go to build strong brains."⁴⁵ In responding to a comment by a conference participant about the ability of backward children to adjust to the demands of adult society, Shearer was even more direct in placing the responsibility on the schools. "These so-called backward children, when they get out in life, prove they were not backward but very much forward and I believe we are responsible largely for keeping them back when we should not."⁴⁶

The membership of the Conference was dominated by administrators of state residential schools for delinquent youth. Yet they believed that the public schools should make accommodation for backward children. Placing backward children in state institutions, Krauskopf noted at the 1905 meeting of the Conference, would segregate them unnecessarily:

The special teacher will trend away from the conventional instruction so much that the vital connection with the rest of the school system will be lost and will thus tend to prevent transfers to and from the regular classes. Quite a per cent of these slow children can be so strengthened by special instruction that they can enter the regular grade work for certain periods, if not permanently, much to their benefit and occasionally a normal child can be helped greatly by work with the special teacher. This helpful interchange can only be secured by keeping the special classes under the administrative system and making them an organic part of some school. In order to preserve this organic relationship the modifications of the curriculum and methods of instruction for the subnormal should be as small as possible, consistent with good results to the individual.⁴⁷

V.

Exploring, as we have done, the evolution of our thinking about deviance has brought us part way toward an understanding of the development of public school programs for children with learning difficulties. It was a reasonable course of action for those who embraced a therapeutic role for the public school to accept responsibility for children who were difficult to teach. The willingness of school reformers to accommodate these students, however, does not explain why they created special schools and classes for this purpose. If we are to understand why they did so, we must look at their efforts as part of the attempt of Progressive era reformers to enhance the administrative capacity of an emerging American state—that is, those agencies and individuals in the public sphere who hold obligatory authority over others.⁴⁸

The establishment of special schools and classes was a local effort not dissimilar to national, state-building initiatives of the day. In both instances, individuals working in incipient bureaucratic organizations sought to fashion new institutional structures to cope with the changes accompanying the nation's transition to a market economy.⁴⁹ The attempts of Presidents Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson to reform the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) between 1904 and 1920 represent one such effort. Each in their own way, these three Progressive era presidents sought to increase the Commission's power to regulate the nation's railroads beyond that contained in the 1887 Interstate Commerce Act. By expanding the rate-making authority of the ICC and giving it new power to supervise the operation of railroads, they enhanced the federal executive's capacity to regulate transportation over and against that of the Congress and the courts.⁵⁰ Similarly, the creation of special schools and classes offered a bureaucratic strategy to enable urban school systems to adjust their operations to increasing enrollments.⁵¹

School managers—my term for those educational administrators, board of education members, and local politicians who oversee the operation of the public schools—were not, as it turns out, the sole promoters of these reforms. Twentieth century efforts to provide for low-achieving children, not unlike many other social welfare reforms, were not simply state initiatives. Voluntary, philanthropic organizations, as I noted earlier and as we shall see in chapter four, often established these programs with public involvement occurring much later in response to inadequacies, unanticipated or otherwise, in these initial private efforts.

Lester Salamon has referred to this public-private interplay as third-party government. As Salamon sees it, historical accounts of the development of social welfare have concentrated their attention on the growth of public expenditures during the twentieth century. As a consequence, these investigations have tended to ignore the role of private agencies in the provision of social services. The combination of philanthropic initiatives with public funding, Salamon goes on to say,

has had the effect of increasing “the role of government in promoting the general welfare without unduly enlarging the state’s administrative apparatus.”⁵² The state-centered interpretation that I will advance in this volume, then, will take into account the role played by the interaction between the schools and private philanthropy.

VI.

In the remainder of this volume, I examine what we might think of as the first crusade for the education of at-risk students. That is, I am concerned with the events occurring between the establishment of the first public school programs for backward children at the turn of the twentieth century and the appearance of learning disabilities some sixty years later. I will explore those events in two public school systems, those of Atlanta, Georgia, and Minneapolis, Minnesota.⁵³ In the chapters that follow, I will be looking at both the way school managers conceptualized and talked about children with learning difficulties and the institutional arrangements that they introduced to accommodate these students. In the latter instance, I will focus my attention on the interplay between the public schools and private philanthropy. Throughout the volume, I will be concerned with exploring the contradictory purposes that appeared to guide this reform effort.

In chapter two, I examine the development of special classes for backward children in the Atlanta Public Schools between 1898 and 1924. Employing a state-centered interpretive framework, I explore the reasons why the city’s school managers created special classes to accommodate these low-achieving children. In chapter three, I consider how the appearance of a medical discourse for talking about deviance influenced our understanding of childhood learning difficulties. I first examine how the research of a number of psychologists and educators from the early 1930s onward transformed the rather uncertain condition of backwardness into a full-fledged neurological impairment, minimal brain injury. I then explore the

efforts of parents of low-achieving children to popularize, under the rubric of learning disabilities, this medical understanding of childhood learning difficulties.

Chapter four examines the role of private philanthropy to promote public school programs for learning disabled children. I will look specifically at the work of the Atlanta Junior League during the 1930s to establish a citywide clinic for the treatment of childhood speech and language problems, a facility that from the beginning provided services for children with neurological impairments. I then examine the attempts of the League after 1938 to promote the expansion of these services to the public schools, a campaign that resulted in the establishment in 1967 of Atlanta's first public school program for learning disabled children.

In chapter five, I shift my focus to Minneapolis and examine the effort of that city's public schools to accommodate children with learning difficulties. Looking at the period between 1930 and 1970, I explore the transformation of the city's remedial services into a program for learning disabled children.

The book will conclude with an epilogue that examines the emerging movement for the education of at-risk children. Appearing on the scene at the end of the decade of the 1980s, this initiative reflects the same contradictory purposes that have affected other earlier efforts on the part of school managers to accommodate children with learning difficulties. There are, I argue, indicators of an emerging sea change in our understanding of childhood learning difficulties that may enable those supporting the education of at-risk children to reconcile their conflicting goals. One such indicator has been the increasing criticism of curriculum differentiation on the part of educational researchers. A second has been the attack, beginning in the 1970s, on segregated special education. A third and final sign of this impending change has been a conceptual crisis among special educators involving the continued viability of learning disabilities as a handicapping category. Finally, I look at what the historical developments we have explored throughout this volume tell us about the current effort to educate at-risk students.

In this introductory chapter, I have established our conceptual framework for examining the evolution throughout this century of public school programs for children with learning difficulties. The strategy is two-pronged and involves an investigation of changes since the mid-eighteenth century in our understanding of deviance and an examination of the state-building efforts of American school managers. Using this strategy, we were able in the chapter to explain why turn-of-the-century school reformers came to accept responsibility for the education of children with learning difficulties, and why they selected special classes and schools as their vehicles for this purpose. In subsequent chapters, the same strategy will enable us to examine the evolution of these programs, first into an array of remedial classes for low-achieving children and ultimately into initiatives for the education of the learning disabled. Tracing the history of this reform effort will in the end provide us with a fresh vantage point for interpreting the now emerging movement for the education of at-risk children.