

Disability History Association Podcast

Interview with Jason Ellis

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Caroline Lieffers: Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers and today it's my pleasure to be talking with Jason Ellis, who is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. Jason is also the author of a new book, *A Class by Themselves: The Origins of Special Education in Toronto and Beyond*, which was published earlier this year by the University of Toronto Press. Jason, thank you so much for joining me today.

Jason Ellis: Thanks for asking me.

Caroline: So, the first question I want to ask you is, how did you get interested in the history of special education?

Jason: It was, it was a topic that for me, when I was looking around for a master's thesis all those years ago, it was a topic that raised a lot of historical questions. And since historical questions are always what interested me, that's, that's why I got into it, and that's why I'm a historian.

Caroline: Can you tell me a little bit more about, kind of, how you stumbled into the archives that ultimately ended up informing this project?

Jason: Yes. So it was, it was, it was an interesting sort of story, actually. The most important sources that I found, I did find almost by complete accident. I won't say a total accident, I suppose, but, but nearly. I mean, these are the pupil records that I used a lot, the student records that I used a lot in the book. The Toronto District School Board has this really great archives, probably, I think one of the best collections anywhere in North America. And they have a small, but very committed archive staff. And at that time, they had a conservator whose main job was to sort of preserve the artwork that the school board also has. But he was trained in archival records management and preservation as well, and one day I was at one of the record storage locations, working on some other stuff, and he said, "You should look at these. We have all this stuff." And he sort of pointed at it, and it was a huge wooden filing cabinet, but like, you know, six or seven feet tall and, and twice as wide. And it was filled with old student records from different schools. And he said, you know, "we have, we have these, we've tried to protect them and we think they have a lot of historical value." And, and in reading through them, I mean, I really I found that they did. And certainly, like the Toronto District School Board to, to its credit, they not only preserved them, but they allowed me to use them for my research. And that was really important. I think by being open in that way, they enabled me to ask and answer questions that I simply couldn't have, couldn't have otherwise if I hadn't had access. And they could have locked those down and said, no, you know, we can't let you look at them. So, it was an enormously valuable resource.

Caroline: That's wonderful to hear. I often find when I'm doing this podcast, I have to give abundant credit to all the many librarians and archivists and curators and collections specialists out there who make all of this stuff available for us.

Jason: Absolutely.

Caroline: Do you mind actually if I ask a little bit of a follow-up question about those pupil record cards?

Jason: Sure.

Caroline: So, one of the things that we wrestle with a lot as historians is the question of anonymity, right? And when you're given something like these record cards to work with, you're entrusted with a lot of personal information about students. So, what was your thought process about how you were going to use them, if you were going to anonymize the students? Can you talk me through that a little bit?

Jason: I always assumed I was going to anonymize the students. I wasn't, I was never sure how much detail I would be able to tell, though I was given fairly wide latitude in that. I used pseudonyms and I assigned them at random and, and I sort of protected any other information that might allow someone to identify themselves or a family member. I mean, a number, you know, some of these kids were born as early as 1905, so, and between 1905 and 1940, so some good chances are many of them are no longer living. But it was important to preserve their anonymity.

On the other hand, I also, I had some interesting talks with a historian, mentor, and colleague, and friend of mine, Steven Maynard, who studies gay and lesbian history in Canada. And he had studied old records of arrests and courts and police records. And one of the things that he said in, said in his work and that he has also said to me is that, you know, those, those men he was talking about, men who were, who were arrested for various, under various sodomy laws, I think. So those, those men had nothing to be ashamed of. They had nothing to be ashamed of. And, now the people arresting them might have had something to be ashamed of, but those men had nothing to be ashamed of. And I also, I often thought the same thing about the kids and the parents in the records that I had. They had nothing to be ashamed of. There's no shame in what they were seeking from schools or who they were. And so, I tried to keep that in mind, that I would balance that privacy against, against the strong belief that these were genuinely interesting people who had interesting lives and would want to see themselves represented in history.

Caroline: Yeah, that's, that's a really great thought process. Thank you so much for kind of inviting us to, to go with you on that journey. That's great. So, one of the things that comes up kind of from the outset of your book is the language that is used to describe special education classes. So, sometimes we see the term "auxiliary education" classes and sometimes we see "special education." Can you talk me through the differences in what those two terms actually mean?

Jason: The basic difference is terminology. "Auxiliary education" was what people called special classes for children who are disabled, Deaf, disadvantaged, or just sometimes just different. This was the term that was first used around the turn of the 20th century, 1900s, 1910s into the 20s. I think if you'd asked people a hundred years ago, or if you'd used the term special education a hundred years ago, there's a good chance that many people working in the field would have recognized it; it was also used. But it really only seemed to come into wider use around 1930 in the United States and the more modern use is, is "special education." I'm not really sure why the change. There's nothing, there's nothing untoward about "auxiliary" that I know. I've, I've never seen any, anything, anyone mention that. So I don't, I don't know why the change to "special education." But that's sort of the, the history of the terminology.

Caroline: Oh okay, that's really helpful. Thank you. One of the key arguments that you make in your book was that there were many different stakeholders involved in the development of special education. And in many ways, they were trying to accomplish dissimilar things. So, can you talk me through some of the different strands that are at play in your book?

Jason: Yeah. Thanks. I think that's a really important thing that came out of this research for me, was that, and it's one of the enduring paradoxes of special education: different people are trying to do different things using special education, and sometimes they're trying to do things that are contradictory. Well, that's always been the case. You know, there were, there were three main strands at the beginning. There were eugenics, and administrative school reforms, and sort of the efforts of child savers to improve conditions for, for kids. So, you could already sort of sense some of the contradictions there between, say, eugenics and child saving, and, and some of the convivialities if you will, as well. I suppose, I mean, eugenicists thought special classes would help to control dangerous, so-called "mentally defective" or so-called "feeble-minded" children. Child savers saw these classes as improving the opportunities of children who were generally living in poverty and disadvantaged. And the administrative reformers in charge of these large school, city school systems like Toronto saw a way to manage enormous enrollment growth, like on a scale that would be hard for us to fathom, and a huge heterogeneity in the school population, something that was a relatively new thing.

Caroline: That's really important, that level of nuance that you're providing, sort of considering these different aims, these different needs, and populations. Yeah. Thank you for that. I'm obviously leading into the next question here, that your research has looked at disability and education from a lot of different angles. Moving roughly chronologically through your book, you cover a lot of different phases in the thinking around special education. So I'd love for us to explore some of those through our conversation today. And I guess the best place to start is at the beginning. So, I, in your book, you mentioned that the first auxiliary education classes developed in the Toronto Board of Education around 1910-ish. So, can you talk us through, kind of, why 1910? Why that moment? What was going on in the thinking at that time?

Jason: That time was, was a moment of social reform, like really a moment, in a way that other historians have certainly looked at. It was a moment of social reform in Toronto, but, but in other urban centers across Canada. There was a huge impetus in Toronto in that time, even in 1910 itself, for reform. So, one of the things that I sort of, one of the points that I try to make in the first chapter of the book is that special education or auxiliary education isn't this sort of peripheral thing that's going on in the schools. It's one of a suite of reforms that is front-page news in the city of Toronto. And so you get people like Jesse McCarthy, who was a controller on the, on the Board of Control, like a city councilor – but the Board of Control is a slightly executive part of the City Council – and he was, you know, he was a reformer who was involved with temperance, with public health, with building public housing, with breaking up the private street railway monopolies. And he was also very involved with special education classes. That was one of his causes. So, this reform rode shotgun to, to other reforms in a way that that is quite interesting.

Caroline: Absolutely. So, it's very much of the progressive era slew of reforms.

Jason: Exactly, exactly, in several, in several different ways. It's progressive in the sense that it's about efficient use of public resources. It's progressive in the sense

that it's about the improvement of children's lives. It's progressive in the sense that it, that it has ties to, to the, to this, that, you know, the pseudoscience, or then the science of eugenics, which progressives were certainly involved with.

Caroline: Absolutely. Do you mind if I ask another follow up question, just building on what you've said? So, I mean, how would you characterize these first auxiliary education classes that were developing? Which populations were they particularly interested in reaching and what happened in the classroom?

Jason: In the 1910s, there are already, by 1915 or so, several different types of auxiliary or special education classes. So, one type of class are classes for so-called "backward" children. These are children who are over-age for the grades they are in. They have repeated grades, or they started school late, or they're new to the country, or there are so many different reasons why they're there. And the purpose of these classes was to try to help these kids to catch up, to get back into the grade they were in for their age. So, there's a strong remedial function in these classes. They also have sort of, sometimes they're providing medical services and food and other things as well. There's that type of class.

At the same time, there's very just, a very clearly different type of class marked as different, classes for so-called "mentally defective" youngsters. And these are classes for kids who it's assumed cannot be remediated. And so the, the classroom environment there and the type of thing that's happening there is much different. The curriculum and the teaching are much more focused on what these kids can't do, and what, what limitations are on them and working to their limitations. Whereas the "backward" classes are really focused on what are the possibilities for these kids, getting them back up to the, to the, to the mainstream classes.

And then there are the other types of classes, the forest schools, the open-air classes, and so-called foreign classes and so on.

Caroline: So, at what point does IQ testing begin to really factor in? And then how does that change the landscape of auxiliary or special education?

Jason: So, my argument was that IQ testing changed that landscape significantly. It was not, it wasn't invented until around 1910. The actual concept of IQ wasn't invented until around 1910. The very first special education classes then really didn't rely on IQ testing. They didn't have IQ tests - which isn't to say they didn't have tests of mental age - but they didn't have widely available IQ tests. But the person who popularized IQ in North America, the American psychologist Lewis Terman, he was very keen on using IQ in special education in particular, I think in ways that we haven't sort of realized to this point. He had a theory about learning problems. Whereas in the 1910s lots of people had said that learning problems could be attributed to the factors that would sort of work in "backwardness," things like kids who are new to the country who don't speak English, or kids who have been ill for a long time and have missed classes - these are kids who can be, who can be caught up and they're in special classes. Terman's theory was that no, every kid who is in a special class is there because they have a low IQ. Low IQ is innate and it's unchangeable. You can't catch these kids up, and you shouldn't try.

And so Terman enters this debate around the mid 1910s, early 1920s, very much with the intention of turning the prevailing logic about special education on its head. And he's very successful in doing that. And he's very successful in doing that because he's an awesome promoter of IQ as a concept and of the Stanford-Binet Test of IQ that he

develops. And the test is, he specifically develops it so anybody can use it and he gives it away free in this book; as long as you have the book you can administer this test. It's not a written test. It's a face to face test. And so, it's almost like the open source of the early 20th century. And school boards, really school, not just school boards, but, but everybody who wants to know the secret of innate ability jumps on it. And it's very easy to use. It's quick.

There are a lot of dubious claims in the science of IQ and people pointed that out at the time. The other thing about Terman is that not only is he good at getting his, his material out there, I mean, he's a good, he's a good self-promoter and he's a good idea, "I have a great idea" guy. I mean, we see these people in education, unfortunately, you know, with, with fads like this and this is one that really caught on for a lot of reasons that have to do with how sharp Terman was at that sort of thing.

So, by the 1920s, I guess the implication is that when schools start using this, these tests and this theory, they, they really have to buy into the view that special education classes are more akin to streams than remedial places. They're rigid. Kids go there. They stay there. They get a curriculum that is adapted to their abilities, or so-called "inferior" abilities, and they don't move out of those classes. And in Toronto, that's very much the case in the 1920s. So, from remedial to streaming.

Caroline: That's very interesting. There's a few different threads that you've dropped in there that are really interesting and we're going to pick up on them, I think, in subsequent questions. But for right now, I want to follow up the kind of transnational nature of this relationship that was developing between Terman's work and then the Toronto Board of Education, because, of course, Terman is based in the United States. And it's in fact clear over the course of your book that much of the conversation around special education in Canada in the first half of the 20th century was informed by what was happening in the US. Do you feel that this flow is sort of one-directional, that it's ideas from the US just traveling across the border up to Canada? Or is it more complicated than that? Are there even other countries involved?

Jason: I think it's more complicated than one-directional. I mean, it's, it's, it's part of, a historian named David Tyack called North America, or called American school reformers an "interlocking directorate," famously. Well, that directorate doesn't terminate at the international line. Canadians are English-speaking. They're, for the most part they're attending the same education conferences. They're talking to the same people. The school systems are very similar. They're universal and heterogeneous. They call for the same sorts of solutions. Some of the big players in special education are Canadian as well. They're Canadian expatriates. So, so E.R. Johnstone, he taught, he taught special education teachers at Vineland, the institution at Vineland, New Jersey, in the 1900s and 1910s and it's really one of the first people and places to offer professional development for special educators. Well, Johnstone was Canadian by birth. David Harris Russell is, is another. He had a significant impact on reading disabilities work, and he was from Ottawa and then latterly Saskatoon, and eventually ended up at, at UCLA. And Helen MacMurchy as well, her, her work was, was well known in the United States. And so, while other countries were involved - I mean, there's some early exchange with the United Kingdom - the difference is that the universality and heterogeneity of schooling in, in, in Canada and the US is much different than it is in Europe at that time.

Caroline: That's a really important point. I hadn't actually thought about it that way. So thank you. Let's pick up on that other angle that you mentioned, which is these sort of streams that the students end up being put in. And I would assume that once

they are put into these streams that their educational experiences begin to look quite different, right? You mentioned, for example, vocational tracks for certain kinds of students, right? So I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about some of these different programs that students were streamed into, and then how students or their families reacted to these programs and being streamed in this way. Were they excited about the opportunities that seemed to be presented to them, or were they frustrated about being separated into these, kind of, different tracks?

Jason: I mean, the different, the different tracks are different types of classes for different types of children with disabilities, disadvantages, who are Deaf and so on. The reactions are enormously varied. Parents, children, families reacted in all sorts of different ways, which, you know, it turns out you might expect. People are people and we don't expect that they're all going to react the same way to, to the sort of schooling experience.

What you see in the, in the student records, I think more than anywhere else, is this full range of reactions, positive and negative. When reformers or school people talked about special education, I mean, they were often in the role of promoters, so they said nothing but good things. Later on, they were also reformers and they said nothing but bad things, because that was what they wanted to do, it was to change a system. But if you look at the evidence, the pupil records in particular, they add an, just an enormous complexity to the, to the, to the responses in all sorts of ways. I mean, you see, if you study enrollment patterns in the, in the junior vocational schools, for example - so, the junior vocational schools were schools for adolescent, adolescents who were classified as, quote unquote, "mentally defective" or with low IQs, or sometimes you know, who were looking for or it was thought they were looking for a terminal program at grade 10 - those programs are unpopular. And you can tell because whenever kids get a chance to do something else, adolescent, you know, 14, 15, 16 year-olds get a chance to do something else, like go to work, they leave those classes in droves, whereas in the mid, you know, at the height of the Depression, when there isn't a lot of work, well they're all back in there. You can also read in pupil records really direct ways that, that, that parents talked about special classes. I have examples of, you know, a child being placed in a sight-saving class for children with considerably reduced vision. And his parents said there's no way we want him in that class. He's going to be in with a bunch of kids who are, quote, I think it was, quote, "handicapped" and that will be of no use to him. Whereas there were other parents who came to the school and said, my, my child is having difficulty learning to read in the regular class because she can't see the blackboard. She can't see the text. Can we put her in a sight-saving class? And, and the range of reactions is as varied as that.

Caroline: That's really important to remember, right, is these individual experiences and the fact that we really shouldn't generalize too too much about what special education meant to different people. Let's actually pick up on this issue of sensory disabilities. You have a chapter that specifically kind of hones in on vision and hearing loss and also physical disabilities. So, can you tell me a little bit about what was going on at the Toronto Board of Education regarding disabilities and the expectations that were on these students in particular?

Jason: Yeah. That chapter was the one that I found the most surprising, I suppose, most interesting in that sense. Surprising as in I found things I didn't expect. The thing that I found that I didn't expect was that schools made an enormous number of modifications and accommodations for kids with physical disabilities, with hearing difficulties, with speech difficulties, and vision difficulties. And they did that right from

the beginning. So, you know, 93 years ago, the Toronto Board of Education opened its classes for children with physical disabilities, and they modified an existing school building. They built ramps. They, they renovated and modified washrooms with bars, so kids who used wheelchairs could get in and out. I just didn't expect to see that. It was remarkable. And the modifications would be the same as any modification to an existing, unfortunately not accessible building.

But it was a sort of a double-edged thing, because while the schools were willing to accommodate these kids in those sorts of ways, they also expected that those kids would accept treatment. And that treatment was generally designed to make those kids more like kids who did not have disabilities. And sometimes that was to the detriment of their schooling. So, one example I can give you is in those classes for children with physical disabilities, if they had a child who used a wheelchair or crutches, as many children who had been affected by polio might have, or, or kids who had "spastic paralysis," as it was then called, those kids had to spend quite a bit of school time working on the sorts of exercises that would enable them to walk without a wheelchair or without, without crutches and maybe just a brace. Well, that cuts into school. That cuts into academic time. And those kids didn't necessarily, not necessarily, in many cases didn't need to have those types of therapies because they were already getting around. They were getting around in wheelchairs and in, in - but the assumption then was that what was most important was that if you had a disability, you'd be as much like non-disabled people as possible. So accommodations on the one hand, but not on the other.

Caroline: Yeah, that's a common refrain in the history of disability. Absolutely. So, one of the big, kind of, turning points in your book is the rise of something called "special subject disability." So can you explain what this is and how it changed special education in Toronto?

Jason: "Special subject disability" is a lot like what we would today call learning disability. It arose in the 1930s in Toronto and it was reintroduced in the schools. And it really reflects to my thinking a restoration of that remedial function of special education from the 1910s. So, I was talking earlier about Lewis Terman. He said that most kids who don't learn in the regular classroom don't learn because they have low IQs, and there's nothing you could do about low IQs, so don't try. Well, there were some very smart researchers and educators, many of them the United States, but some of them in Canada as well, who figured out that, you know, like, wait a minute, there are lots of kids who are quite bright, but don't learn to read, or have extreme difficulty learning to read, or cannot learn to spell, or have other, sort of, specific subject disabilities. And that is unusual. We should expect them to be able to learn. And so, these researchers started to look into the origins, or like the sources of those sorts of disabilities. And they also figured out special ways to teach kids like this, to learn to read and spell, for example. So that was always sort of ongoing in the 1910s and 20s, even when IQ was of preponderant importance. And it gets reintroduced into schools in the 30s by, by educators who pick it up and say, no, wait a minute, like there is, there are things we can do. The trick here, though, is that while it was applied to some kids, it wasn't applied to every kid in a special education class. So, there were still lots of kids who were sort of stuck in those classes for, for the long term where they didn't get much education at all.

Caroline: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about this figure called "Mabel," who shows up in your book – in quotation marks, of course.

Jason: Mabel. Well, actually, Mabel, I'm trying to think. Mabel was not a pseudonym from the student records. Mabel was in fact a student that one of the school inspectors, I think it was one of the school inspectors – it was either one of the school inspectors, yes, it was Monroe, one of the school inspectors. He, he landed on this, this, this Mabel character, possibly apocryphal, we don't know. But he, but he showed how here was Mabel who had a relatively normal IQ, but could not learn to read. And Mabel was removed from her class, and put in a remedial class, and they worked with her a great deal. And she learned to read and her IQ score improved. And Monroe, who had been a huge adherent to Terman's theory of IQ said, was saying by the 30s, maybe we have this wrong. Maybe IQ does not tell us everything about learning problems. And because he was an inspector, you know, he had, this is someone who had a fair bit of influence on, on the school system, and so you see some changes in classrooms to reflect kids like Mabel. Whether he made her up or not, I don't know.

Caroline: Exactly. The mystery will always remain.

Jason: I've seen other kids who would fit the description, though, and certainly in the records, I know there are Mabels, real Mabels out there.

Caroline: All right. Well, we'll just have to put a question mark next to that one for now. You also mention the ideas of the mental hygiene movement, or sort of, mental hygiene is a phenomenon which really comes to the fore in the 1930s and 40s. So, how is mental hygiene different from eugenics or other ideas that had come before?

Jason: How is mental hygiene different from eugenics is like one of those questions that you might get at your dissertation defense. It's terrifying because the answer is complicated in history and historiographical and historical, but, and probably much better explained by other people. But in the cases that I'm interested in, the mental hygiene outlook by the 1930s and 40s was that mental states are built in environments. Because they're built in environments, that means that they can be changed. That's not something, you know, that's not my unique reading of that. I certainly draw heavily on Mona Gleason's *Normalizing the Ideal*, where she talks about that change. The eugenics outlook was that mental states are fixed by biology or heredity and they can't be changed. So, if you have a view that mental states can be changed because they are created in environments, then you have a much more positive and hopeful outlook on the capacities of school children to achieve all sorts of different things. And it's that that's present in mental hygiene and in special subject disability in some ways.

Caroline: Absolutely, making again, that 1930s moment kind of a turning point in your book, at least as I see it. Yeah.

Jason: Yeah.

Caroline: Yeah. So, to ask a different kind of line of questions, your study is very much focused on Toronto, for logical reasons. I mean, one has to control a project of this sort of size. But I'm wondering to what extent students elsewhere in Canada were able to experience some of these same changes and developments. So, do you have any sense of whether these sorts of classes or ideas were popular in, you know, rural areas, in western Canada, in the Maritimes? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Jason: The subtitle of the book is "The Origins of Special Education in Toronto and Beyond." And I tried to slip in the "and beyond" with some help from the Press to, to round out the picture. But yes, I think what happened in Toronto happened more or

less the same way in other comparable urban systems. And there I'm relying on historic, really good historical work by other people that reveal similarities with Toronto. So, there's, there's Bob Osgood's work on Boston, Gerald Thompson's work on Vancouver, and the late Barry Franklin's work on Atlanta and Minneapolis. And what they find is very similar to, to what I found.

But that's comparing cities to cities. And I think in rural areas, the story is much different, especially before mid-century. There aren't that many services. There are still thousands in Ontario, thousands and thousands of one-room schools all over the province. Ontario by the 30s had a rural special education unit that, as far as I can tell, it traveled around providing some sort of diagnosing and teaching services, as well as probably some professional development for teachers, but not much. That would make a great master's thesis for someone, by the way: the Rural Opportunity Unit, it was called. Beyond that, I, I haven't seen anything in other Canadian provinces that would be similar. But I suppose the point is, coming back to something that I said earlier, special education is an urban reform, just like public housing and public ownership of streetcars. It's an urban reform. And so, we should expect to see it in cities first. It's a reform that eventually becomes ubiquitous, and part of, you know, what people like David Tyack and Larry Cuban have called the "grammar of schooling," so commonplace that it's unrecognizable as reform, but a reform nonetheless.

Caroline: Yeah, that's an important insight. Because we're talking about Canadian history, I feel we'd be remiss if we didn't bring up the issue of residential schools. These are obviously a tragic but extremely important aspect of the history of Canadian education. Does your book or its findings intersect at all with this history?

Jason: It does and it doesn't. I think that one thing that people need to understand is that one of the biggest problems with federal Indian Residential Schools, for instance, was that they hived off schooling for Indigenous children from provincial public schools for white and settler children. They created, you know, it's in the constitution, the separation of responsibility for schools for those two different groups. The federal government did that even in places like British Columbia, my province, where Indigenous students were integrated into public schools in the 19th century and were fairly successful there, if we read, sort of, some of the stuff that Jean Barman has written about that. So, by definition, what happens in the provincial K-12 schools is not the experience of Indigenous children. That extends to special education. However, having said that, you can certainly see some of the ideas from special education in this era, in particular racist thinking about intelligence of so-called inferior races, that's duplicated in Indian Residential Schools. It's an underlying assumption, I think in, in that system that different quote races learn differently unquote and have different levels of intelligence and that education should be adapted to that.

Caroline: An important but unfortunate observation, yeah. Your book wraps up around the time of the Second World War. But you do note that the percentage of children who were enrolled in special education classes actually increases through to the 1970s or so. But you also note that there were some cracks that were appearing in the foundation of this whole concept of special education. So, tell me a bit about some of these ideas that were emerging in the 60s and 70s that are really challenging the conventional wisdom about special education.

Jason: Yeah, I mean, the first thing I would say is that those enrollments increase down to the present. There are more kids in special education now than ever before, more kids with individual education plans and so on, receiving some sorts of services.

The challenges in the 60s and 70s were, you know, ideas of mainstreaming and de-streaming. And so mainstreaming was the notion that special, special needs are best served in regular classes, not special class, not separate special classes. De-streaming was the idea that sorting kids by IQ in secondary schools in particular, like the junior vocational schools that I looked at, doesn't help struggling students and may in fact make them worse off. I mean, so in Toronto, these two things, I mean, they came to the fore around the same time in about 1970 and they really went off like a bomb. Parents and activists challenged the school board for harming their kids - there is no sort of other way to say that - harming their kids by streaming them or putting them in special education classes that they called, quote, unquote, "dead end". And the superintendents and the Director of Education, that they just had no sense that special education was anything other than a good thing, benevolent. They thought Toronto had one of the best systems in the world. And so this was a shock to them. And the well-founded concerns of the parents were borne out by the Every Student Surveys that the Toronto Board of Education did in 70, and 71, and 74, where they looked at the demographics of these different classes and they found working-class kids hugely overrepresented in these, in these lower vocational secondary schools, for instance.

Caroline: Yeah, that's really interesting. So, what this precipitated ultimately seems to have been some changes in education law and policy. And before we move on to our next question, I'd actually like to get you to tell us a little bit more about that. So, does this mean that essentially as we move into the 1970s and 80s, that the number of distinct, sort of, special education classes does go down and more and more students are mainstreamed or included in the general school population? Is that right?

Jason: The answer there is yes and no. It depends on the kids. And so, it's in the 60s that children who have IQs lower than 50 - this was not a subject that I studied in my book because those kids were legally excluded from schools - but there were parent associations, associations for "retarded children," they were called, who in the 50s and 60s lobbied to get kids who had been legally excluded by virtue of low IQ re-included in the education system. And so those kids are coming in, but they're going into separate schools and classes. So that's increasing the special education numbers. There are increases in the numbers of children receiving treatments and services for learning disabilities, part or full-time. That increases the number. At the same time, there is a decreasing of children who are in streamed special education elementary classes. And so it's a give and take, and it depends on the groups being served and the type of service.

Caroline: That's really important. Thank you for elaborating on that. As you are well aware, there continues to be quite a lot of debate about the value and effectiveness of mainstreaming, or if we want to use more up to date language, "inclusion." You even briefly actually mentioned a case that originated in North Vancouver in the 1990s where inclusion was actually deemed to be the more discriminatory education policy. So, can you tell me a little bit about what your thought process is on these issues? And, I mean, how do you approach this often quite sensitive conversation? What do you try to keep in mind?

Jason: I suppose that the one thing that the history has showed me, and I hope I was able to convey through my book, is that this debate is not finished, for good or

for ill. This debate is not finished. I start the book with a quotation from Helen MacMurchy and she said in 1910, a eugenicist and Canadian physician, she said in 1910, "nature has put the mental defective in a class by himself. We had better take the hint." And I finished the book with these two sentences: "A class by themselves? A still-unfinished issue." History hasn't settled the question, and I'm not sure if it will. But what things like the decision you're referring to, the *Moore* decision of the Supreme Court of Canada show, I think, is that there are different interpretations of what different kids need. Parents and kids have different views of how they're best served by schools, and that extends to special education. One of the things that I tried to do in this book as I read these student records was to respect and empathize as best I could with, with the varying decisions that, that parents made about their kids and the services they would receive. Whether I agreed with the decisions they'd made or not, and whether or not I would have made the same decision with my children, I tried to empathize, because there is this wide range of reaction and, and, and view of what is best. And so, one interpretation of the *Moore* decision in British Columbia, it was a case involving the North Vancouver School District that closed its class for, for children with learning, or closed a learning disability support class. The District said, well, we're including everyone, so that's why we closed the class. And Moore's parents said the only way that our child can be adequately educated and receive the right that he has to an education is in a separate class. That's what we want. And they fought that to the Supreme Court and the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada's interpretation of the Supreme Court decision, which was in the Moores favor and against the District, is that schools have to offer pullout classes where this is warranted. In some cases it is. On the other hand, there are lots and lots of kids who are streamed into dead-end special education classes who would've been much better served in inclusive settings, and they could just as easily press a case. And then there have been cases that that were settled at different stages, that, that mainstreaming is the best solution, or inclusion is the best solution for it, for their kids. So, it's not a closed issue and it really does depend. And I hope that in people's best, you know, earnest efforts to define educational policy, they can make room for differences of this sort.

Caroline: And I appreciate your sensitivity and compassion and approaching such a complex issue. One of the things that you do as part of your job at UBC is you teach student teachers. And I'm wondering what you try to emphasize to them in terms of the history of disability and education. What are your priorities in the classroom when you have a chance to teach student teachers about this history?

Jason: And I have a chance often to teach student teachers because a good part of my teaching load is in pre-service teacher education, and the rest is in graduate education. So I think it's odd actually - when you, you put this question to me, I looked at my syllabus and I didn't, in the teacher education class I'm teaching, we're not taking up this topic at the moment. It's simply not possible to cover everything that I, that you want to in a, in a half, you know, one semester "School and Society" course. A similar topic that we are focusing on right now in the class, though, and in the sections I teach and in other sections, and I think rightfully so, is racism, equity, and anti-racist education. And I use history to teach about that, to teach about both the history of racism and how it is expressed institutionally in schools, and also the history of anti-racism and how it's expressed by people and parents.

My hope, though, would be that the book that I've written would be helpful to other teacher education courses, so it's not just in the "School and Society" class that one should learn about the history of disability or the history of special education. And so, I tried and I hope I succeeded to write the book in a manner that was accessible to

people in different disciplines. And that, it could be taught by others in courses about special education and inclusion, which is a required course for teacher candidates at my institution. I hope it would be taken up there. I know I will come back to it in my class. I rotate the topics depending on what we're working on and what I can do.

Caroline: Oh, absolutely. And I can assure you it would also be of use to people working in disability history, the history of childhood, the history of the family, just general social history in Canada. I think you've written a book that speaks across a lot of different sub-disciplines of history, so I'm very grateful for that.

Jason: Well thanks. Tell your friends, thanks.

Caroline: [Laughs] Will do. It seems like you're also very active in doing things like writing op-eds, interviews, basically being a public intellectual. And I'm curious about the ways in which your research on the history of special education informs this work? Does it seem like the public is generally very interested in this history, or perhaps the history of education more generally? Does it have resonance today? And if so, what is it that people are trying to understand today?

Jason: I really think it has resonance. If we can make sense of the educational past, we will better understand the educational present and possibly the future. There is nothing that we do in the present education that doesn't come from somewhere, and in the time I've been at University of British Columbia, you know, working in a faculty of education, I've really turned my scholarship as a historian to looking at present day problems, but, but drawing on historical roots to show them in a new and, and unique way. And that means, you know, that anytime that I do an op-ed or, or a media interview and that's that other public scholar work, if I'm doing it, it's because I know something about the past that I think helps us to understand the present. So as, I mean, this is just one example: a big issue in this province is the ongoing contract negotiations between the B.C. Teachers Federation and the B.C. Public School Employers Association, and the main sticking point at the moment appears to be whether or not class size and composition - which means how big the classes and how many kids with identified different needs are in it - how widely that will be negotiated. Well, that's an issue that these two sides have been fighting about since the 60s. It's an issue that creates enormous intransigence because it, it really goes to the core of the question in educational administration and leadership, which is who's in charge here? If the union and the teachers set the class size, then that is them asserting a traditional management prerogative. And those are the types of debates that historically are not easily resolved. And so that's the sort of thing that I tried to say in my op-ed. We could be in for a long one here because this is, is an issue that we know has this sort of power.

And the other time that I've tried to sneak history into op-eds or in any media commentary that I do, I think it's, the other time that I do it is because someone's making a claim about education, about the educational past, and they're using that claim to justify the educational present, but there's something funky about the claim. So, they're saying that, "schools are facing an unprecedented technical revolution." Well, this isn't true. "Schools today are more complicated than they ever have been in the past." Also, not true. "We have to educate more people from different parts, more, you know, more immigrants than we ever have before." Not compared to the 1910s in places like Toronto. So, I suppose I'm trying to be the fact checker of the historical claims of the many, which, which as you as you, as you know, as a historian is, you know, such a popular thing to be. But I feel it's important, anyway.

Caroline: I'm always happy to see historians using their work in the world, so you have my commendation for what you do. My last question for you, Jason, is what are you working on now? Your book's done. Congratulations. What's on the agenda for you right now? [Laughs]

Jason: I am working. [Laughs] I am working. My new project is still in the history of education, but it's a fairly big pivot, as they like to say. I'm working on suburban housing, schooling, and inequality and opportunity. And so, I have a book manuscript on this topic in process. And really, I guess what I'm interested in is, in short, how Canadian suburbs were initially, sort of, after World War II, these enormous engines of opportunity. And there was extreme income equality in suburbs. If you look at maps that David Hulchanski and other people put together of income equality, it's remarkable how homogeneous they are, how equal they are. But over time, especially since 1970, these same suburbs have become extremely unequal in terms of wealth and income, but also wealth and housing. The schools that got them, that were such a benefit and created so much equality and social opportunity, how did they deal with inequality and limited opportunity and worse, do they contribute to that? I don't know because I haven't got past 1954 yet. But when I get past 1970, that's the type of thing I, I want to answer. Schools were both causes of that change over time and were affected by it. And that's where I'm focusing. And I hope I'll be publishing something relatively soon on that.

Caroline: Wonderful. Well, we'll definitely stay tuned for that. Thank you so much, Jason. I really appreciate the time you took for this interview today. And it was just an absolute pleasure to talk to you and to learn about your work.

Jason: Thank you. Thanks for having me on. And it, it was really fun to do.

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Caroline: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!