

# *America's First Gifted Program*

Hollingworth and the Speyer School Experiment

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*Back cover photo by James G. Thomas, 1939.  
One of the last days Dr. Hollingworth was able to attend Speyer School.*

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## *Dedication*



James Gwynne Thomas, a native of Pennsylvania, earned an M.A. degree in psychology at Columbia University, where he developed a special interest in the social development and adjustment of students with extraordinary academic ability. Because of this interest, he applied and was admitted to the doctoral program at Teachers College. Conveniently, upon completion of his required coursework, the superintendent of the New York City schools directed the opening of a special school to address the needs of students identified as rapid learners. Thomas contacted Dr. Leta Stetter Hollingworth, Director of Speyer School, and as a graduate student was hired and given the opportunity to work at the school while collecting data for his Ph.D. dissertation. At Speyer, Thomas served in many capacities: he assisted teachers, worked with students in small groups, made arrangements for field trips, acted as the official photographer, and in 1939 substituted with presentations about the Speyer School program when Dr. Hollingworth was too ill to fulfill her commitments.

Following Leta Hollingworth's death in 1939, the school administration opted to discontinue the Speyer School experiment. However, Thomas kept much of the student data and stayed in touch with many of the Speyer alumni as they completed high school and/or entered college or the military. In the subsequent year, he arranged reunions and produced several Speyer alumni directories that helped alumni maintain contact with one another. He intended to continue the follow-up studies on school alumni, as well as on the students who were included in his doctoral research data. Unfortunately, he passed away before completing the last chapter of his doctoral dissertation.

Without the work of James Thomas and his efforts to maintain communication with Speyer alumni, as well as the generous donation of his research to the University of Connecticut by his widow, Marion Flint Thomas, the 40-year follow-up study, the Speyer alumni reunion, and this work would not have been possible.

## Prologue

With only weeks to live, she sits by the fireplace in her Croton-on-Hudson, New York, home in deep thought. She is not thinking about her career, her many accomplishments in the fields of psychology, women's rights, education, her love for her home state of Nebraska, or her deep interest in the several causes in which she has actively participated. Her thoughts have moved beyond the awesome responsibility of developing an educational program in the largest school district in the United States—a special experimental program for rapid learners at Speyer School.

No. These are not Leta Hollingworth's thoughts at this time in her life. Foremost and above all are her thoughts about the students she has identified, taught, and grown to love. How will being identified as gifted and selected for the special experimental program affect their lives? How will the program affect their future education? What about the special grouping of students with their academic peers—how will this practice benefit their future? Will they be productive? Will they achieve? Will they be leaders in society, or will they be among the vast mass of followers?

She ponders the future of her students, wondering about this experimental program based on enrichment, the first of its kind in American education. Will this group of top students in the New York City schools benefit from this educational experience, and will it have a positive effect on their future education, their careers, and their lives? Will the program continue, and will it be replicated in other New York City schools or in other parts of the country?

So much is left to do, but there is so little time—too little time left. She will not know of the strides forward taken by the students with whom she has become involved. She will not know of their successes, their contributions to society. Neither will she know about the importance of America's first experimental program for rapid learners based on the concept of enrichment.

As she gets ready for bed, her thoughts flow to the long-time friends and relatives whom she visited on a recent trip to her family home in Lincoln, Nebraska. She had planned for some time to return to Nebraska. In a "homecoming letter" written on December 3, 1937, to the editor of the *Nebraska State Journal*, she wrote:

One more thing I would say. Sometime I shall come back to Nebraska for good. I was born there. I was reared there. I was educated there. I shall take the last long sleep there. The East is too alien for the purpose of eternal sleep.

When it had become apparent that she was terminally ill, she had returned to her home state to purchase final resting places in the Wyuka Cemetery for herself and her husband, Harry Levi Hollingworth. She feels sure that, although the cemetery is a good way from downtown Lincoln now, the town will grow in time, reducing the distance from the local university, which will be a major player in that growth.

Little does she know that one day, nearly 50 years in the future, her grave will be visited by a group of distinguished educators who respect and revere her and her

groundbreaking work with highly able students. These educators will, in fact, be attending the Hollingworth Symposium at the University of Nebraska in 1986.

**Author's note:** The highlight of this symposium was, indeed, a short lunchtime walk to the Hollingworth graves led by Julian Stanley and Camilla Benbow. Surrounded by other symposium participants, Stanley gave an exceptionally well-received toast to Leta Hollingworth for her significant contributions to the advancement of education for gifted students. As the group walked silently back to the symposium, each person knew that he or she had just been a part of a “once in a lifetime” special event. I was a member of this group that attended the graves of LSH and HLH in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1986.

## *New York City Schools in the 1930s*

The public schools in the city of New York experienced unparalleled growth in the number of students enrolled during the 1930s. A major reason for this growth was the large number of immigrants from Western Europe who came to this country by way of New York, America's largest port of entry. School officials had no way of projecting the population growth; therefore, it was not uncommon for an elementary classroom to have as many as 50 students in attendance. At that time, the city had a population of seven million people, one-third of whom were foreign-born, coming from as many as 20 other countries with divergent backgrounds. As more immigrants arrived in the city, most settled in small areas that took on the characteristics of their native cities in Europe or elsewhere. The customs and language of these ethnic groups affected the progress of students in learning and, in some cases, in adjustment in elementary school classrooms.

Teaching and managing an elementary classroom became a serious challenge for the teachers, not just because of communication challenges due to so many of the children's language barriers, but also because of the high number of students in the classrooms. Teachers were forced to be extremely regimented, and discipline became a major factor in instruction. All classrooms were much the same; student desks bolted to the floor limited the opportunity for flexibility or grouping of students to expedite learning. All students were required to complete the same assignments, and those who finished early had to sit quietly with their hands folded on their desks until the rest of the class finished. No student could move ahead with his or her classwork.

This method of instruction was particularly problematic for students who were not average learners, since children of all ability levels were grouped in the same classrooms. No special education or special instruction for low-performing students was provided, nor was there any emphasis on providing instruction for advanced learners. One former student who had attended the New York City schools in the 1930s related that in order to follow directions and not read ahead, she learned to read her book upside down and count backward from one million.

These conditions were a part of the rationale that the superintendent of schools considered in authorizing Dr. Benjamin Greenberg, Assistant Superintendent, to open a special school that would educate those who were labeled as "educational deviates," both the low-end learners and the high-end "rapid learners," as they were called at that time. Dr. Greenberg's particular interest was the education of exceptional children. In a paper presented to the National Education Association in 1938, Greenberg stated, "The challenge to do something about the intellectually gifted children of our nation is made all the more necessary by virtue of the fact that in many of our public schools the policy underlying the educational program is guided by the myth that the bright can take care of themselves."

None of the highly able students could have imagined the breakthrough that was in store for them after having started their formal education under such restrictive conditions.

## *Leta Stetter Hollingworth: An Early Pioneer*

On May 25, 1886, in Dawes County, Nebraska, in a dugout on the White River in a town five or six miles from the site now known as Chadron, Leta Anna Stetter was born. She is believed to have been the first white child born in Dawes County. Her mother, Margaret Elinor Danley, was a homemaker. A petite, warm-hearted woman, Margaret gave birth to three baby girls within a very brief time span, which is thought to have weakened her steadily until her untimely death immediately after delivering her third child.

John G. Stetter, the children's father, had come to Nebraska driving a freight wagon as a young man of 20. More restless than his two brothers, he was gregarious, a good mimic, a lively dancer, and a banjo player (Hollingworth, 1943, p. 11). He was best described as a "rollicking minstrel cowboy." Following his wife's death, this engaging but irresponsible man deserted his family, leaving his three daughters with their maternal grandparents for the next 10 years.

Although the grandparents' homey log cabin and loving care were far more comforting than the Stetter family's "soddy" (a house built of sod with a dirt floor), Leta, the eldest child, grew more and more sad about having lost her mother. She found some comfort, however, in recording her thoughts in a journal, which, scholars have observed, reflected a maturity advanced beyond her youth.

At age six, Leta began her formal education in a one-room log schoolhouse built by settlers. The classes were small, with only 12 students, and the teacher used nature as a laboratory. Perhaps of most significance was the individualized instruction that was given to each child. This approach was precisely what Leta needed: challenging curriculum designed to meet her particular learning abilities. Bright and eager to learn all she could, Leta thrived in this stimulating educational environment, which years later was assessed as "excellent in every respect" (*Prairie Years*, pamphlet published by Columbia University Press).

When Leta was 10 years old, her grandparents moved to the nearby town of Chadron for the winter. There Leta entered a graded school for the first time, a major shift for a student having experienced her primary years in individualized instruction. Advanced for her young age and having enjoyed learning at her own pace, as well as having been encouraged to learn all she could, Leta continued to excel in the graded school and at age 16 graduated.

Leta's home life changed drastically during her upper-grade years, bringing more sorrow into her and her sisters' lives. When she was 12 years old, her father remarried, and the three children went to Valentine, Nebraska, to live with him and their new stepmother. The girls were unhappy, having been torn from the benefit of gentle grandparents into a home with a stepmother ill-equipped to handle their uncomfortable transition. Leta later called this period the "fiery furnace" and politely referred to its root as "dipsomania," which today is known as alcoholism (Hochman, n.d.). Despite her unhappiness, Leta held steadfastly to the principles of truth, honesty, and a belief in people.

Following high school graduation, Leta entered the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, where she pursued her two major interests of literature and creative writing and received acclaim as well as a reputation for excellence in writing. The depth of her thoughts, as evidenced by the following passages—the first from a letter, the second taken from a biography of her (Hollingworth, 1943)—reflect her keen intelligence, genuine respect for others, and a benevolent spirit of sharing her gifts and talents.

*As for me, I think I could care above all things to have my life absorbed by human beings—just to give as much as I have to people. I believe that they are as willing and eager to absorb one's life as lawns are, or kettles or hats. I conceive of it as terrible to lie at the end of the world on one's death bed, and look back on rows of shining kettles or "good investments" or medicine bottles emptied in the interest of one's "health." I have that sinking feeling when I think of it. Such things seem to me so pitifully futile, but there is more comfort in the thought of life being absorbed by life again. So I should prefer to give what I have to human beings, since give it somewhere we all must.*

*Leta A. Stetter  
August 1906*

*But it is a fancy of mine that all creative souls die with some "necessary" vision unuttered in their hearts and that they wait wistfully, watching those who have yet the privilege of life, to see whether someone will not utter it. Of course...they die with many things unsaid. It is unthinkable that Carlyle or Emerson or Elizabeth Browning had said all they could before they died; they were obliged to leave much unexpressed; and then, likely there were things that they never could have expressed at all, because they were not the proper "mediums." There are seers yet to come.*

*Leta A. Stetter  
May 9, 1907*

While attending the university, Leta joined many groups and organizations and established herself as a well-rounded individual and an asset to her peers. She received her B.A. degree and teacher's certificate in 1906 and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

In September 1906, Leta began her teaching career and served as assistant high school principal in Saline County, Nebraska. She was responsible for teaching English, Latin, German, history, physiology, civics, and botany, as well as keeping the schoolhouse in good repair and performing janitorial work. The following year she taught in McCook High School, where she remained until December 1908, when she resigned after becoming engaged to Harry L. Hollingworth, whom she had met while at the University

of Nebraska. Leta and Harry were married on December 31, 1908. The academic world thereafter would come to know this dynamic young woman as Leta Stetter Hollingworth.

Harry took a job as an assistant to Professor James Cattell at Columbia University in New York City, and the couple moved. When Leta came to New York City in 1908 as a young bride, women's suffrage was still more than 10 years away. Marriage and motherhood were considered the primary purpose of women's lives. In fact, it was illegal to give women information about birth control. New York City schools would not hire a married woman, and Leta was not able to find a market for her short stories.

For three years, Leta was unhappily confined to the role of housewife. Harry understood her frustration, and the couple saved money from odd jobs to finance her return to school. Leta had become interested in problems of social and educational maladjustment, and when she entered Columbia University in 1911, it was to study educational psychology.

Columbia was hardly a feminist stronghold. Both Leta's doctoral advisor, E.L. Thorndike, and her husband's mentor, James McKeen Cattell, were predominant advocates of the "vulnerability hypothesis," which attributed greater mental and physical variability to the male sex. Leta tested this biological determinism with studies of sex differences and went on to challenge other dogmas with studies of women's performance, women's vocational aptitude, and the social controls that shaped women's choice to bear and raise children. Most of her research on women was done before she was a graduate student in 1916. Later, as a Columbia faculty member, she concentrated on her studies of children, but throughout her life, she remained concerned about women's issues.

After completing an M.A. degree in education at Columbia, Leta found employment administering tests at a clinic for "mental defectives," which was the term used then for mental retardation. The clinic's director, Dr. Max Schlapp, had recently returned from Paris, where he had worked with Alfred Binet, and he wanted to include Binet's testing methods in his clinic. Leta quickly acquainted herself with Binet's intelligence tests, which were first administered in a hospital.

In 1914, an opportunity arose that Leta could not refuse. She became the first psychologist hired under the Civil Service Administration in the city of New York. Well-respected by patients and staff alike, her prestige rose in this jealously guarded medical field. During the next three years, she became very active in helping to organize societies for the study of "mental defectives," and she was instrumental in establishing the professional status of the position of clinical psychologist. Applying her interest in writing, she published scientific papers detailing analyses of data collected from clinic files.

Through her work as a clinical psychologist at Bellevue Hospital, Leta's studies led to a paper titled "The Mentally Defective as Cases in Courts of New York City" in which she established a correlation between intelligence and delinquency. She also renewed her interest in the prevailing assertion of the time that there was greater variability among men than among women. She developed an experiment to test this theory using data she collected from approximately 1,000 cases diagnosed at the clinic between 1912 and 1913. Her research led her to study women's social status, which in turn became a favorite topic of hers for more publications (White, 1984).

Continuing her scholarly interests while pursuing academic requirements for her Ph.D., Leta published four textbooks and more than 80 articles in education and psychology journals. The majority of the journal articles dealt with her growing interest in the psychology of highly intelligent children, known to her at that time as “favorable deviates.” *Echolalia in Idiots* and *The Psychology of a Prodigious Child* were early papers she developed from this interest (Hollingworth, 1917).

Leta completed her Ph.D. at Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1916 and was offered the position of chief of the psychology laboratory at Bellevue Hospital. She rejected this offer, however, accepting instead the position of instructor of educational psychology at Teachers College, which linked her to the field of education for the rest of her life.

A short-lived project for exceptional children in 1916 enhanced Leta’s prestige further, resulting in a promotion to Assistant Professor of Education in 1919. At that time, her work in clinical psychology certified her with the New York State Commission for Mental Defectives as an Examiner in Mental Defect.

As an associate professor, lecturer, advisor, and clinical psychologist, Leta authored a text, *The Psychology of Subnormal Children* (Hollingworth, 1920), which would become the standard text used by educators throughout the world. Research for one of her early papers, *The Psychology of Special Disability in Spelling* (Hollingworth & Winford, 1918), which was based on clinical testing and interviews, had sparked her interest in exceptional children. Years later, she would make the following observation in her writing:

Science has already furnished us with a means of identifying exceptional children, and of measuring the amount of their exceptionality, so far as intelligence is concerned. If science within the next fifty years should furnish us with the means of prophesying adult achievement on the basis of a child’s exceptionality, the history of human progress might be modified in ways in which we now can but vaguely guess. We should then be able to select and cherish human genius without regard to race, sex, or condition of economic servitude. (Hollingworth, 1943, p. 141)

As Leta’s career advanced, so did her interest in gifted children. In 1922, she collaborated on plans to organize an experiment in P.S. 165, an elementary school in New York City. This endeavor was to be known as the “Special Opportunity Class” (Hollingworth, 1943) and called for the gathering of 50 children, ages seven to nine and ranging in IQ scores from 134 to 155. At the same time, students of equal abilities who were not participants in the project became the control group, to be studied for the purpose of comparison. This experiment was to accomplish two objectives: (1) to study children in as many non-academic ways as possible; and (2) to experiment with curricula, projects, materials, procedures, and instructional methods not used in standard schools to test the profitability of such higher-level education for pupils. Educators at that time were of the opinion that bright students could take care of themselves (Hollingworth, 1943), but Leta Hollingworth was all but certain that this position was false. Her experiment with the “Special Opportunity Class” revealed the truth.

From that experiment, Leta developed some 32 papers for education journals. During that time she also wrote *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture* (Hollingworth, 1926), a text that held the experiment’s results and that was used universally thereafter.

## **Breeding an Intellectual Aristocracy**

The *New York Times* published a review of *Gifted Children* on August 22, 1926: *The scanty literature of race culture is enriched by this new volume added to M.V. O'Shea's "Experimental Educational Series."* The author, whose authoritative position in Columbia College, given her judgment value, has accumulated an array of facts and marshaled them with scientific acumen and precision. She has not been able to command an unlimited wealth of material, for she alludes to the surprising fact it is only within the last five years that systematic research into the progress of superior children has been attempted. It was Francis Galton who, way back in '80s, wrote a brilliant treatise on "Hereditary Genius," in which he proves that mental superiority is cumulative; the outcome of favored families. But the world has of late been so engrossed with theories of democracy, which is opposed to the recognition of special values in children, that such writers as Galton and Ribot have fallen into discord.

It is more essential, then, when such a progressive, impartial writer as Dr. Hollingworth shows us the other side of the matter; that we attend with an open mind. She has exploded several cut-and-dried educational axioms; such as that all children in school should be held to the same level. Her contention that intellectual aristocracy is inevitable, that progress depends upon it, is not a baseless theory, but a suggestion she demonstrates; from her first allusion to what constitutes "high caste" in a barbaric society, to her final declaration that we should have special teachers to help the exceptional child. Society has for several generations been giving every effort to the preservation of the weak, and has left the strong, the superior, to carve out their own way, unaided to achievement. Now and then a warning voice has been lifted, like that of Maria Morevaky, declaring that "no country is great that neglects its people of talent." And there is at present hopeful indication that the world is changing in this respect, in the tendency of wealthy individuals and societies to offer rewards for marked superiority in the fields of science, art and literature. But it is the thinker, not the careless or indifferent reader, who will be struck by the prophetic wisdom of Dr. Hollingworth's book.

Her ideas do not run along popular channels. She belongs in the group of pioneers, fated to speak the truth as they see it, whether it is acceptable to people in general or not. But students of eugenics, progressive teachers, intelligent, disinterested parents will feel deeply grateful in the author of this so sane and helpful a book. One of the many remarks that have unique value is regarding a popular fallacy that a child is necessarily the offspring of its parents in tendencies, in capacities, in possibilities. "Children resemble their parents not because the minds and bodies of the latter can affect them, but because their parents, too, were derived from the germ plasma which they carry at the time their parents were carriers." She apparently is not quite fixed upon the subject of the power of acquired traits in parents having permanency, that is, of being an endowment for their offspring. But as this is still a mooted question among scientists, it is the more to her credit that she does not dogmatize. In fact, she is everywhere singularly moderate and calm, showing no partiality for any theories, merely offering facts. The lesson of her fine book is that marriage must in the future be based upon intelligent understanding, not upon any ephemeral emotions, and that the children of superior parents be given every possible chance for the development of their natural gifts. She quotes with emphasis an observation of Franklin K. Lane: "Progress means the discovery of the capable. They are our natural masters. They lead because they have the right. And everything done to keep them from rising is a blow to what we call our civilization."

Leta's lifelong commitment to studying those 50 students and other exceptional students was rooted here. She stayed in contact with that group for the next 18 years, even expanding the original group to include their spouses and children.

The "Special Opportunity Class" experiment was most beneficial in arousing widespread interest in gifted education. Leta was asked to give lectures and seminars to educational organizations throughout the country that were eager to learn about her research on highly able children.

Her belief in these exceptional children became the rationale for what Leta perceived as the necessary next step to understanding them. In 1924, she began collecting data and developing case studies on children with IQ scores above 180 (Stanford-Binet). She initially located five subjects on which she developed extensive case studies. Later she added six more case studies to her research, but she put this aside while she worked on other projects. After her death, her husband published her research as the book *Children Above 180 IQ: Origin and Development* (1942).

Leta's quickly advancing career earned her a full professorship in education at Teachers College, an esteemed rank she received in 1930, when few women were awarded such a prestigious opportunity. Her new position gave her opportunities to pursue her escalating interest in highly intelligent young people. She was quickly building a stellar reputation for her research on high-ability students and her ever-increasing number of publications relating to this group of children.

Convinced finally that she had found those students she would champion for possibly the remainder of her life, Leta sent a memorandum to that effect to the American Council on Education in 1930. It stated her strong belief that:

...intellectually gifted children are among the most valuable assets in a civilized nation. To waste them is to waste the fundamentals of power.... Thousands and even millions of dollars are being spent by privately endowed foundations to identify, study and subsidize the education of delinquents, feeble-minded children, and other biologically unfortunate and socially undesirable deviates.... Hardly any of the funds appropriated for public education are directed to the conscious selection of subsidy of the biologically elite. (Hollingworth, 1943, p. 152)

It is little wonder, then, that in 1934, the New York City schools, in conjunction with Teachers College and at the request of a committee on individualization, proposed a five-year experimental program. It was the unanimous opinion of the district's superintendent and board of assistant superintendents that Dr. Leta S. Hollingworth be invited to serve as Educational Advisor of the "Terman Classes," classes comprised of students with IQ scores above 130. Leta was becoming well known as the champion of exceptionally bright students.

Leta's publications and her ongoing research on children with IQ scores above 180 made her a natural choice to be hired to direct this new program. Her work with the "Special Opportunity Class" more than a decade earlier had continued to help frame her philosophy on appropriate schooling for highly able learners. Her beliefs more and more reflected her own early schooling. Her one-room school experiences had been pivotal in forming her philosophy of how schools should address the education of students. Now,

those experiences would form the experimental program she would direct at P.S. 500, Speyer School. This program was to include experimental classes for rapid learners, as well as classes for slow learners.

Accepting the city's offer, Leta set out with a committee to identify students of the proper age and requisite intelligence, proximity, and willingness to participate in the experiment (Greenberg & Bruner, 1941). Careful attention was given to maintaining the important demographics describing all New York City public schools, but the curriculum taught to Speyer School students would uniquely accommodate the exceptional students attending what became known as "Leta Hollingworth's school for rapid learners."

The program was designed as a five-year experiment whose dates are listed as 1935 to 1940; however, the school did not open until February 3, 1936, due to the length of time it took to identify the 50 students for its two classes.

During her tenure as Educational Advisor (director) of Speyer School, Leta was presented in 1937 the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws (LL.D) by her alma mater, the University of Nebraska.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth, professor, lecturer, adviser to hundreds, counselor, leader in the field of education, author of nine books and 80 articles, but more importantly, a caring human being, passed away on November 27, 1939, at the age of 53. A pioneer in educating the gifted was gone, her work at Speyer School incomplete.

Reflections on Leta's contributions to education include the following testimonials:

Her diligence in promoting education efforts on behalf of intellectually superior and talented students remains unexcelled. (Hollingworth, 1943, p. 141)

...[S]he introduced a new approach and a new point of view. She broke sharply with traditional psychology, which placed major emphasis upon psychological abstractions. Her plan was to use methods of psychology and other sciences primarily for the purpose of the further understanding of human beings. No psychologist of her generation has more clearly or consistently made his work a study of the whole child. During her entire professional career Professor Hollingworth's work was a brilliant example of what has been hailed...as the new psychology, the psychological study of the individual. (Hollingworth, 1943, p. 195)

And from a student at Speyer School:

Dr. Hollingworth was always a quiet person. She didn't show how important a person she was. She was always greeting and talking to us wherever she met us. She spent hours after working at school, taking the trouble to plan things for the children.... Our class will always remember her as a kind and cheerful person that made Speyer School what it is today. Not only our class but the people who knew her will miss her as much as I do. (Hollingworth, 1943, p. 195)

From a colleague writing in the *Teachers College Record*:

Her work with exceptional children gave expression to the fundamental traits of her character and her personality. Her

decisions and opinions were based on facts; she was opposed to all forms of educational wishful thinking. Although she was always impervious to the appeal of sheer sentimentality, she was capable of the deepest affection for human beings and intense devotion to human welfare.

The subjects of her studies were never human guinea pigs to her; they were the individual objects of her deepest concern. She remained on intimate terms with all the members of her various experimental groups of gifted children, visiting them, encouraging and advising them, and in a great many cases supplying tangible necessities for years of further education.... This intense interest in and devotion to the living individual, combined with the clear-eyed vision of the scientist, accounts for the unique scientific validity and practical value of her contribution. (Hollingworth, 1941, p. 143)

And finally, from the secretary of the American Association for the Advancement of Science:

She was a very rare person.... She was always frank, intelligent, kindly, never evasive, and always devoted to the advancement of truth and real service to children. We shall not see her like again soon, I fear. (Hollingworth, 1943, p. 193)

### **Leta Hollingworth's Writings**

The contributions made by Leta Hollingworth to gifted education are richly documented:

#### ***Books***

*Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture*, New York: Macmillan, 1926.

*The Psychology of the Adolescent*, New York: D. Appleton, 1928.

*Children Above 180 IQ*, New York: World Book, 1942.

#### ***Journal Articles***

"How Should Gifted Children Be Educated?" *Baltimore Bulletin of Education*, 50, 195–198 (May 1931).

"The Achievements of Gifted Children Enrolled and Not Enrolled in Special Opportunity Classes," *Journal of Education Research*, 24, 1–7 (with Howard Gray) (November 1931).

"Intellectually Superior Children," *McClure's Magazine*, 1, 51–61 (May 1925).

With the exception of one article, "An Enrichment Curriculum for Rapid Learners at Public School 500: Speyer School" (*Teachers College Record*, 39, 206–306, January 1938), no other known record of the special program developed at Speyer School is documented in the literature. Much of what is contained within the pages of this book has not appeared in the research prior to this time.

## *Identification: Who Are the “Rapid Learners”?*

Speyer School, formerly known as Public School 500, located at 125th and Amsterdam, was designated as the new school that was to address the academic needs of students referred to at that time as “educational deviates,” meaning both students who performed at the low end and those achieving at the high end academically. Classes for the low-performing students were known as “Binet classes,” while the classes for rapid learners were referred to as “Terman classes,” in honor of Lewis Terman of Stanford University, a pioneer in the scientific study of gifted children.

Identifying rapid learners in the largest school district in the United States was only the first major task Leta Hollingworth faced in designing this experimental program. To facilitate the identification process, she asked elementary principals in the New York City schools to identify the youngest students in grades three through six for possible testing.

Grade skipping was the only means at that time to address the district’s advanced learners, so it made sense to Hollingworth to look first at the youngest students in each grade as potential candidates for Speyer School, as those were the students most likely to already have been skipped into their current grade. Students were tested, and Hollingworth presented their names to Dr. Benjamin Greenberg, Assistant Superintendent. After careful consideration of the list of possible candidates for the rapid learner classes, Dr. Greenberg and Dr. Harold Campbell, Superintendent, informed Hollingworth that the list was unacceptable; it did not represent the broad ethnicity of the New York City schools. (The district’s school administrators could not realize at that time, of course, that they had identified a major problem that still plagues educators in this country today: the identification of gifted students from all races and ethnicities. The identification of underrepresented students in gifted education programs continues to be a nationwide blight on American education that is well documented in research.)

To help broaden the pool of candidates to represent more accurately the school population for the purpose of creating the rapid learner classes, the *New York Times* published announcements of the much-anticipated experimental program. The response was overwhelming. Approximately 600 applications for admittance to the rapid learner classes were submitted from all parts of the city by parents and guardians.

Following the initial announcement of the program for rapid learners, regulations were set up by the administration to guide the selection process. These were as follows:

1. As far as possible, only children born between February 1927 and February 1929 would be accepted.
2. All sections of the city would be represented.
3. Children selected should represent as many of the national groups residing in New York City as possible, and the proportion of any one nationality or ethnic group should not exceed the proportion of this ethnic group in the general population.
4. As far as possible, there should be an equal number of boys and girls.

5. The pupil must earn an IQ of 130 or above on a Stanford-Binet test of intelligence (Greenberg & Bruner, 1941).

Since only 50 students (two classes of 25 students each) could be accommodated, students representing both sexes within the age limits of the experiment were selected from all boroughs and ethnic groups in the city. These students were between the ages of seven years and nine years, eight months as of February 1936, guaranteeing that none might be too young to assimilate with the senior high school when the Speyer School's five-year experiment would be terminated. (It was believed at that time that children younger than seven were not yet sufficiently mature to make the daily trips to and from school.)

The second round of identification of possible candidates for the rapid learner classes at Speyer School yielded the following results, demonstrating that racial and national origin was approved by the administrators of the New York City schools. Not surprisingly, the process of identifying possible candidates for the rapid learner classes yielded an extensive mix of racial and national origin, representatives of the city, as follows (Greenberg & Bruner, 1941, p. 77):

American Negro	Hungarian
Austrian	Irish
British West Indian	Italian
Czecho-Slovakian	Japanese
Chinese	Mexican
Danish	Polish
Dutch	Romanian
English	Russian
French	Scot
German	Spanish
Greek	Swedish
Haitian	

Interviews and home visits informing parents and enlisting parent participation were strategies that were used when further information was needed.

The instrument Hollingworth used for identification was the Stanford-Binet intelligence test, formerly known as the Binet-Simon Measuring Scale for Intelligence, which Leta, as a psychological examiner with many years of experience, knew to possess a high degree of reliability and validity. She recommended that students in the top 1% of the distribution of intelligence—those who tested at or above 130 IQ—be accepted as candidates for Speyer School. An exception was made for a few students with special abilities whose IQ scores were between 120 and 130.

Hollingworth noted the range of intellectual capacity that existed among this group of identified students—a range of almost 70 points. She wrote in a report to the director of the School of Education at Teachers College: “This range is as great as would exist between an average child and an imbecile” (Hollingworth, 1936). Hollingworth also mentioned in her report that one student, whose IQ was 194+, “is intellectually capable of good work in twelfth grade of the senior high school, but it would be absurd to place

him there, he being 9 years and 6 months old and a child except intellectually. But how, in the meantime, should he be educated?" (Hollingworth, 1942).

Almost all of the students identified had skipped at least one grade, and it was determined that they were too young to skip another grade, as it would have been inappropriate to dislocate them with regards to other phases of their development. Not only were these children being taught at least two grade levels below their mental capacity, they were being exposed to material that was at least one grade level below their actual knowledge as shown by their performance on the Modern School Achievement Test. They already knew what they were being taught, as well as what was being taught one grade level above them. Some of the top students were two, three, or four years ahead of their grade-level status in intellectual achievement.

Once the identification of the students was complete, Hollingworth was ready to move on to the next major task: working with the Speyer School teachers, Myrna Schuck and Catherine Clarke, to develop the curriculum for the rapid learner classes, a task she had been looking forward to since the inception of this experimental program.

## *The Speyer School Enrichment Curriculum*

The large amount of attention focused on the Public School 500 (Speyer School) educational experiment was due in large measure to the fact that, for the first time, two great institutions—the Board of Education of the City of New York and Teachers College of Columbia University—had combined forces in a cooperative endeavor to solve a major educational problem in a concrete manner. The aim was the education of exceptional children, whose natural growth did not show optimum development in regular education classrooms in the New York City schools. This experiment, begun in 1935, was the first to be concerned with the development of an improved educational program for both “dull normal” students and “rapid learners” (Greenberg & Bruner, 1941).

One of the primary purposes of Speyer School was the development of a curriculum appropriate for students of high intellectual ability. This need was emphasized at the outset by the Superintendent of Schools of New York City as follows:

Education is something more than guiding youth out of the realm of incompetence.... The school that fails to make provision for the child of higher intellectual power is fully as neglectful as the school that does nothing for the child of lower mentality.... There must be special education for the gifted as the handicapped.... We must identify these young men and women as early in their school life as possible and make provisions to educate them for leadership. (Greenberg & Bruner, 1941)

After identifying the students for the rapid learner classes, Hollingworth faced a second ominous task: working with her staff to develop an appropriate curriculum for Speyer School students, ages seven to nine, that would meet their intellectual needs. Her challenge was that this group represented an IQ range of 70 points (130–200 SB), a range greater than had been realized before in any of the New York City public schools.

Another important factor was the directive from Superintendent Harold Campbell and Assistant Superintendent Benjamin Greenberg that Speyer School students must complete the regular curriculum in addition to the curriculum Hollingworth and her staff would develop. At first, this did not seem reasonable for this special group of students; however, as planning and classes began, Hollingworth’s research indicated the Speyer School students could complete the requirements of the New York City schools’ daily curriculum by working on it for only half of each day—research that opened the eyes of the district’s administration and stunned professors at Teachers College (Hollingworth, March 5, 1937). Articles announcing the progress of rapid learners completing the regular school curriculum in half the time of regular classes in the city schools appeared in the *New York Times*, providing widespread awareness of the needs of rapid learners that had not before been noted by the school district or the community at large.

Without knowing that she would someday have such an extraordinary opportunity to develop an educational program for students known at that time as “rapid learners,” Hollingworth had begun years earlier to develop her philosophy of the most appropriate way to educate students with stellar IQ scores. Back in 1924, with her first case study of a student with an IQ score above 180, Hollingworth had learned that much of the

time spent in school by using only an age-based curriculum was, for advanced learners, a waste of their time. Boredom, loss of interest in learning, and discipline problems often emerged as a result.

The requirement of New York City's school administration that students participating in the experimental program must first complete the regular grade-level curriculum set the tone for Hollingworth to develop an appropriate educational program based on her own early years beginning in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Nebraska. She had thought many times about how she loved her early education, and she had written about how much she enjoyed attending school with students of different ages and different developmental levels in the required subjects and activities. Hollingworth intended to replicate in this New York City school the very best of the educational experiences she recalled from attending the one-room schoolhouse on the plains, about as far from New York City as one could imagine.

In a 1932 presentation to the First Congress on Mental Health in New York City, Hollingworth made the following poignant statement that presaged her groundbreaking approach to curriculum for Speyer students:

### **How Shall a Democracy Educate the Most Educable?**

At present these children are lost in the vast enterprise of mass education and are left to handle their special problems by themselves, while the energies of the teachers are bent upon the main business of dealing with the ninety-nine percent who test below 130 IQ (SB). Common sense would tell us that a child who tests as far above the average as a feeble-minded child tests below cannot escape having special problems under the conditions of mass education.

These beliefs gained strength with each presentation, article, and convincing statement Hollingworth delivered. They became her philosophy, her battle cry, which had been rooted years before and had developed fully with time and experience. These convictions ultimately guided the development of the Speyer School enrichment curriculum units, known as "The Evolution of Common Things." Hollingworth believed that "to take their rightful place in civilization...the intellectually gifted need especially to know the history and evolution of culture, as it relates to common things" (letter from September 28, 1937).

The philosophical underpinnings of Hollingworth's goals for rapid learners are eloquently expressed in the following letter, which became her manifesto on teaching and stimulating these students' superior minds.

*Supervisors and Teachers of Intellectually Gifted Children,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

*How shall we educate those children who are as far above the average as mentally deficient children are below?*

*Mental measurement clearly reveals these children. We know in modern times how to identify them. We also know at what rate they learn. Children of the mental calibers selected for the rapid learner classes at Public School 500, Manhattan, learn so rapidly*

*that they easily cover twice as much ground in a term as does the average child in a year. Thus these children have much spare time in the ordinary classroom. What do they do with this time?*

*The present Board of Superintendents of New York City, feeling strong dissatisfaction with the way in which gifted children have drifted without special consideration of their needs, has undertaken to find the best education for such pupils. Educational measurement tells us that these children will have at least half of every day, through the elementary school, for intellectual work not now offered. Before this additional education can be given to those capable of it, it is necessary to arrive at a justifiable theory as to what knowledge is most suitable for this special purpose.*

*At the outset, we must recognize that no absolute criteria exist by which to select from all phases of human experience those most valuable for such a group. Nevertheless, we are not altogether at sea. We may note first a few negative considerations. It is useless to consider intensive work in classical languages or in mathematics, for instance, as a "general sharpener" or as a general "discipline" of the minds of these rapid learners. The education given should be as will actually function specifically in their lives. It should afford a mental content to which can be assimilated that which is perceived in the world of their time.*

*Another negative consideration involves avoidance of subjects which are already taught in high schools. Latin and algebra, for instance, can be learned by very gifted children when they are nine and ten years old. But what is the use of having this done?*

*Coming to positive criteria, modern thought about education emphasizes preparation for life as it will be lived. The child should have brought to his attention whatever will help him to understand his world, and to render to others maximum service of which he is capable. We know that cultivation depends upon the highly intelligent for innovations, for improvements. "Progress means the discovery of the capable. They are our natural masters. They lead because they have the right. And everything done to keep them from rising is a blow to that we call our civilization." This is the essence of democracy at its best.*

*Others can conserve, but only the exceptional person can originate improvements. Therefore, should not the education of the most intelligent be primarily for initiative and originality? But originality depends first upon sound knowledge of what has been done previously, and of how it was accomplished. To take their rightful places in civilization, therefore, it would seem that the intellectually gifted need especially to know the history and evolution of culture, as it relates to common things. At present this is not taught to children (or to adolescents) except in fragmentary and casual ways. A person may graduate from elementary school, high school and college without ever learning the evolution of refrigeration, of textiles, of ships and like common things. These things are taken for granted, and the knowledge of life that is derived from study of how they came to pass never enriches the thought or attitude of the person.*

*The activities that make up the life of civilized man may be classified and designated in various ways. For instance, such topical classification might be as follows: (1) food, (2) clothing, (3) shelter, (4) health and sanitation, (5) trade, (6) time-keeping, (7) illumination, (8) law, (9) government, (10) education, (11) science, (12) philosophy (history of thought), (13) institutions, (14) warfare, (15) labor, (16) recreation.*

*Each of those areas of culture can be studied as a “project” of deep interest to gifted children. It is the years between 7 and 12 that intellectual curiosity is in full possession of the person. In early years the mind is not distracted by economic struggles, love affairs, or similar interests of later years. It occupies itself primarily with questions of fact. These are the intellect’s own years, as it hounds knowledge relentlessly with questions of Where? When? How? What? Who? Why?*

*At Public School 500, Manhattan, a series of enrichment units is being worked out with rapid learners in the form of teachers’ handbooks, dealing with *The Evolution of Common Things*. The present unit, Number 1 of the series, ably formulated by Mrs. Myrna Schuck, deals with one phase of transportation, i.e., transportation by air. It will be followed by other units, covering various aspects of human culture.*

*It is true that this unit, and others to follow, will be especially adapted to the instruction of pupils in large cities. However, highly intelligent children everywhere in the modern world can use the materials, in some measure.*

*In closing, we would point out that this undertaking in curriculum did not spring full-grown from our own foreheads. It grew out of previous experiments with gifted children, at Public School 64, Manhattan, at Public School 11, Manhattan, and at Public School 165, Manhattan, in years gone by.*

*Leta S. Hollingworth,  
Educational Adviser to  
Public School 500, Manhattan  
Speyer School*

To know about and understand various areas of culture equips us with a knowledge of life that enriches a person’s thoughts and attitudes. Through knowledge and experience, Leta Hollingworth had established enrichment as a critical key in her program philosophy, instead of the rapid promotion used until that time. In his biography of Leta, her husband Harry reported that her belief was that while young students with exceptional minds could readily absorb information and knowledge, their emotional and social growth could not adapt to the higher elevations (Hollingworth, 1943). As such, grade skipping, she felt, was not the optimal way of accommodating the learning needs of such students. Truly, she was a pioneer in educating exceptionally capable young children.

Leta Hollingworth did not have a predetermined enrichment curriculum. Instead, she and the two teachers hired for the rapid learner classes, Myrna Schuck and Katherine Clarke, established units of study to broaden the base knowledge from which students could form judgments and conclusions. During the five years the school was in operation, the following units were developed (Greenberg & Bruner, 1941):

1. The History of Aviation
2. The History of Communication
3. The Evolution of Transportation by Land
4. The History of Illumination
5. The Evolution of Art, Literature and Music
6. The Development of Health and Sanitation
7. The History of Clothing

8. The Evolution of Law and Order
9. The Progress of Man's Efforts to Conserve Natural Resources
10. The Story of Shelter
11. The History of Trade and Money
12. Time and Time-Keeping
13. The Story of Toys and Games
14. The History of Transportation by Water

Every major academic field was represented in the enrichment segment of the Speyer School curriculum. Students gained practical skills through hands-on involvement in real-life learning. Hollingworth's belief in first-hand experimentation was the basis for the enrichment the students acquired through their study of "common things." The Deweyan philosophy she espoused was critically important for these brilliant students; learning was active, not passive in any sense.

Each unit of study was different from the regular curriculum taught in the morning, and many additional experiences, such as field trips, speakers, and what would come to be called mini-courses, were provided that would not have been possible to provide to students of average ability in a regular classroom. As Hollingworth and her teachers worked to develop the enriched curriculum for the Speyer students, they kept 13 principles in mind.

### *Principle One: Multi-Age Grouping*

If one visited the Terman classes, the first obvious characteristic would be the apparent differences in the height and maturity level of the students in each class—the result of students of different ages being grouped together into the same classrooms. Most likely, these differences would be noticed even before differences in the students' eagerness to learn.

### *Principle Two: Above-Level Testing*

In 1986, the University of Nebraska, Hollingworth's alma mater, held a symposium honoring her lifetime achievements and, in particular, her contributions to the fields of psychology and education. One of the featured speakers was Dr. Julian Stanley, Professor at Johns Hopkins University at that time and well-known for his contributions to the field of education. According to Stanley, Hollingworth was the first to initiate the concept of above-level testing that was the inspiration for his Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY). He stated that Hollingworth first used above-level testing in 1916 as she began developing case studies of students who had IQ scores above 180 Stanford-Binet, research in which she held a special interest.

Above-level testing determines where a student is in learning a particular concept or skill. A pre-test or assessment is necessary to determine the current level of knowledge the student possesses in a given area or subject. Using a pre-assessment, a teacher can determine, for example, if a third-grade student has mastered all of the math concepts that are taught in third grade. An assessment can then be made to measure skills that are usually taught in a higher grade level.