

# The Legacy of Leta Hollingworth

Linda Kreger Silverman

Lewis Terman is considered the forefather of gifted education, but our field's foremother, Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1886-1939), has not enjoyed the same level of recognition. When she is remembered, her name is usually mispronounced and misspelled. (No "s" in Hollingworth, please.) This is a perfect year to rediscover the contributions of Leta Hollingworth since it marks the 50th anniversary of her death. (We missed her 100th birthday by three years!) Hollingworth continues to be a moving force in gifted education. Her life, her values, her dedication to gifted children remain an inspiration for us all.

Leta Hollingworth is best remembered for a book she never finished: *Children Above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet: Origin and Development* (1942). She passed away on November 27, 1939, and the book was completed from her notes by her husband, Harry L. Hollingworth, another noteworthy figure in American psychology. It stands today as the most comprehensive longitudinal study ever conducted of children in this range of abilities. The book has been a Bible for parents of extraordinarily gifted children who have had no other place to turn for information and guidance.

Less famous but equally important is Hollingworth's textbook, *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture* (1926). It was published shortly after Terman's *Genetic Studies of Genius* (1925) and became the first major text on the psychology and education of the gifted. Terman's primary concern was the description of giftedness as a hereditary factor. Hollingworth, however, believed that the fruition of natural ability is dependent upon opportunity in society. What a person **can do** may depend on congenital endowment, but what he or she actually **does do** probably depends on the environment (Hollingworth, 1926, p. 14).

In *Gifted Children*, Hollingworth (1926) challenged Galton's (1869) notion that the gifted will surmount all obstacles and rise to eminence.

Those who investigate eminence agree. . . . An overwhelming majority of illustrious persons have had fathers who were far above the average in social-economic conditions. . . .

. . . . One possible interpretation is that education and opportunity are the prime determinants of achievement, since nearly all the great men have been born in comfortable homes, of parents in superior circumstances. If opportunity were indeed the prime determinant of eminence, then we should expect those who belong to socially inferior categories to be virtually excluded from it. This is just what we do find, since the uncultured,

the poor servants, and women are very seldom found to have achieved eminence. (Hollingworth, 1926, p. 11)

In concert with her belief in the importance of education, Hollingworth established the first course on the nature and needs of the gifted at Columbia University, officially inaugurating our field. In recent years, Hollingworth has been remembered for initiating one of the most famous experimental programs for gifted learners at the Speyer School in Manhattan. Her program emphasized independent study, creativity, major principles, and student-centered curriculum. She introduced the study of biography into the curriculum for the gifted. These concepts are the staples of modern-day programming in gifted education.

It was Hollingworth who conceived of the notion of "off-level testing" which inspired the current talent searches (Stanley, 1988). She conducted some of the first studies of the emotional and social development of the gifted and developed the first methods of counseling the gifted. Carl Rogers was one of her students; her "child-centered therapy" paved the way for his client-centered therapy (Kerr, in press). She published 30 studies on the gifted: case studies of highly gifted children; comparison of the sexes on mental traits; longitudinal studies of gifted children in a special class placement; and original research on incidence, physical condition, size, growth rate, neuro-muscular capacity, stature, tapping rate, early intellectual development, vocabulary, leadership, personality development, playmates, social adjustment, adult status, and more. Her research did much to dispel the prevailing myths that gifted children were small, weak, and uncoordinated.

In addition to her contributions in gifted education, Hollingworth is revered as one of the pioneers in the psychology of women and was considered the "scientific bulwark" of the women's movement (H. Hollingworth, 1943, p. 184). As a graduate student, she mounted a one-woman campaign to prove that women were equal in intelligence to men and won the battle (Shields, 1975; Silverman, 1989). She was one of the first clinical psychologists and professors of clinical psychology, helping to establish the first standards for psychological practice (Fagan, in press). She authored some of the first and most influential texts on adolescent development, mental retardation, learning disabilities, and special education. She was one of the first to recognize the possible coexistence of giftedness and handicapping conditions. In addition to her 82 published articles, she was also a poet.

No one cared more about the gifted than Leta Holling-

worth. In her autobiographical sketch, Hollingworth (1940) summarized her life's work by saying:

I consider . . . one of the most important of all problems for the development of social science—the problem of how to recognize, how to educate, how to foster and how to utilize the gifted young. (p. 34)

This year we will honor Leta with a commemorative conference at her alma mater, The University of Nebraska at Lincoln, on October 19-21. This will be an opportunity to learn more about Hollingworth's continuing inspiration to the field. We hope you will join us for this special tribute. For information, please contact Dr. N.S. Griffin, Coordinator, Gifted Education, 302 MLH, U. of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0143.

### References

- Fagan, T.K. (in press). Contributions of Leta Hollingworth to school psychological services. *Roeper Review*.
- Galton, F. (1869). *Hereditary genius: An inquiry into its laws and consequences*. London (New York: Appleton, 1870).
- Hollingworth, H.L. (1943). *Leta Stetter Hollingworth: A biography*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Hollingworth, L.S. (1926). *Gifted children: Their nature and nurture*. New York: Macmillan.
- Hollingworth, L.S. (1940). *Prairie Years*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hollingworth, L.S. (1942). *Children above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet: Origin and development*. Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book.
- Kerr, B. (in press). Leta Hollingworth's legacy to counseling and guidance. *Roeper Review*.
- Shields, S. (1975). Ms. Pilgrim's progress: The contributions of Leta Stetter Hollingworth to the psychology of women. *American Psychologist*, 30, 852-857.
- Silverman, L.K. (1989). It all began with Leta Hollingworth: The story of giftedness in women. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 12(2), 86-98.
- Stanley, J.C. (1988, September 6). Personal communication.
- Terman, L.M. (1925). *Genetic studies of genius: Vol. 1. Mental and physical traits of a thousand gifted children*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.