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Women in History— Leta Stetter Hollingworth: Educator and Advocate for Gifted Children

Jan Deeds

I should prefer to give what I have to human beings, since give it somewhere we all must.

Leta A. Stetter, August 19, 1906. (Hollingworth, L.A., 1940)

Leta Stetter Hollingworth gave what she had to human beings through her life as a poet, a scholar, a researcher, a feminist, an educational psychologist, and a powerful advocate for gifted children.

Leta was born on a homestead near Chadron, Nebraska, on May 25, 1886. Her mother died when she was three years old, so she and her two younger sisters went to live with their maternal grandparents. When Leta was twelve, she and her sisters went to live with their father and stepmother in Valentine, Nebraska. After graduating from high school, she attended the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, receiving a teaching certificate and her B.A degree in 1906. That same year she became engaged to classmate Harry L. Hollingworth.

The couple married on December 31, 1908, and lived in New York City where Harry was earning his Ph.D. as a graduate assistant to psychologist James Cattell. After teaching for two years in Nebraska high schools, Leta was unable to work because of a New York City law prohibiting married women from teaching. She began graduate studies at Columbia University and received an M.A. in Education in 1913, and a Ph.D. in Education in 1916. Upon graduation, she became an instructor at Columbia in Educational Psychology, where she began her innovative studies of the education of gifted children.

Hollingworth's research during her graduate studies focused on the psychology of women. At a time when women's professional and personal lives were socially and legally restricted, she used ". . . her mastery of the artful techniques of scientific research and report . . ." to challenge the beliefs that supported those restrictions. Her dissertation topic, playfully named "Functional Periodicity", assessed the mental and motor functions of women, during and outside of the menstrual period, and of men, and

About the Author

Jan Deeds has been the Assistant Director for Gender Programs for Student Involvement and Director of the Women's Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln since 1998. She designed and administered an innovative social learning curriculum for the Nebraska Scholars Institute, a residential summer enrichment program for gifted high school students, from 1988 to 2000. She was introduced to the work of Leta Stetter Hollingworth during her work with Dr. Barbara Kerr at the UNL Guidance Laboratory for the Gifted and Talented in 1982–83. Email: jdeeds1@unl.edu.

found no evidence of diminished abilities related to the menstrual cycle. She challenged the theories of the leading male psychologists of the time, demonstrating with her studies that sociological factors, and not biological factors, were at the root of sex differences in intellectual and career performance.

I consider this 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 (Hollingworth, L.A., 1940).

Hollingworth applied her research skills to these questions, establishing a Guidance Laboratory at Columbia Teachers College to do educational and psychological counseling for gifted children, and in 1936 directing an experimental school for highly gifted children, the Speyer School in Manhattan. She published 4 books and 80 journal articles based on the research conducted in these settings.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth died of cancer on November 27, 1939 and was buried in Wyuka Cemetery in Lincoln, Nebraska. What she offered to gifted children was strong research that built the foundation of gifted education.

References

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