



Crucial Topics in Foundations of Education: International Perspectives

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Exploiting the Educational Potentials of Future Citizens as Nation-Building Policy: The “Project Talent” or the Origins of American Longitudinal School Data

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The emergence of the modern nation-states at the beginning of the nineteenth century depended on strategies to optimize the talents and abilities of the future citizens loyal both to both the nation and to maintaining social stratification. In this respect, the history of the last two hundred years reads like a long effort to perfect strategies and technologies to secure these ends.

Amid this long history, a crucial, trail-blazing innovation was the implementation of the so called “Project Talent” (1960) – an attempt by the American government to longitudinally track the learning progresses and adult life outcomes of students exposed to different sorts of educational and pedagogical interventions. While policy debates that rely on this kind of thinking and this kind of evidence are common today, they were once quite rare and controversial.

This lecture explores the origins of the debates and data systems that gave rise to this “longitudinal thinking” and their long-term influence on debates about improving not only American school quality. These debates both embodied and recast larger, international discussions happening at the OECD and elsewhere, about the potential of systematic analysis of large school systems. Examining these debates and tracing their legacy contributes to our understanding of the history of social science research on schools and the ways in which large-scale data collection shapes understandings of social processes and debates about the public good.