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"Taking Their Measure": Quantifying Childhood 1878 - 1914

"The prime object of measurement and testing children," The Child Study Monthly wrote in 1895, "[is to] determine whether their minds and bodies are in proper condition for school work [and] whether the child has developed at the proper rate," Leila Zenderland's recently published Measuring Minds is concerned with the larger contexts in which intelligence testing emerged in the United States. This paper focuses on other aspects of enthusiasms for measuring children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Belgian mathematician Adolpho Quetelet had initiated "the scientific way of ascertaining human proportions." It was Harvard physiologist Henry Pickering Hawditch's 1878 study of the heights and weights of Boston school children, anthropologist Franz Boas maintained, that brought these matters to the attention of Americans. By 1900, similar studies had been conducted by many others. Boas would author one of the more comprehensive turn-of-the-century anthropometric studies of school children. Physician and physiologist William T. Porter collected height, weight, chest girth, grip strength and other data from 33,000 St. Louis school children, concluding that those who were taller and stronger possessed greater "mental power" than others of comparable age. Porter was not alone in his conclusions.

Others set about measuring different functions. Concerned that little was known about their motor ability – and of the opinion that school subjects could be better taught if "we knew just movements children can make" – John Hancack published his "Preliminary Study

of Motor Ability" in 1894. At the same time, psychologist G. Stanley Hall and others were designing tests in an effort to determine children's perceptions of right and wrong, how they became socialized, and other aspects of behavior. Reflecting a widely held belief, Hill maintained that educational progress was dependent upon a thorough knowledge of "the growth of the body, brain and soul of the young of the human species."

The presumed reciprocal relationship between strong, healthy, well proportioned bodies and proper mental function (which found its analogy in ongoing physiological investigations of the relation of nerve to muscle function) focused attention on the importance of providing proper exercises for children and youth. Play and games, which had a social component, soon were seen as superior to routine callisthenic movements. Large numbers of educators as well as social reformers, as Dominick Cavello has argued in his book Muscles and Morals, were supportive. Less has been written about interest expressed by physicians, social scientists, and even physiologists. This paper addresses this subject.
