

Beyond Poking the Chimp with a Stick: A Tribute to Philip W. Jackson (1928-2015)

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Figure 1: Photo taken April 18, 2015 in Phil Jackson's home, with Jackson's students Bob Boostrom, David Hansen, René Arcilla and Craig Cunningham.

On July 21, 2015, former John Dewey Society President Philip W. Jackson died peacefully in his home in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago. He was 86.

Remarkably, while Jackson eventually made his mark as a philosopher of education, he did not start out that way. He was trained as a psychometrician, with a 1955 doctorate in educational psychology from Teachers College, Columbia. After a year at Wayne State University in Detroit, Jackson became an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, where he stayed until his retirement in 1998. Jackson's early work, with University of Chicago colleague Jacob Getzels, was an effort to create a useful measure of creativity. Getzels and Jackson's book, *Creativity and Intelligence: Explorations with Gifted Students*, published in 1962, earned effusive praise from reviewer E. Paul Torrence in *The School Review*:

The research behind Getzels and Jackson's *Creativity and Intelligence* may well go down in educational history as one of the century's most powerful spurs to educational change. At one fell stroke, their study did much to expand concepts of giftedness, to outmode concepts of over- and underachievement as gauged by intelligence quotients, to stimulate unprecedented interest

in the development of creative talent in education, and to dramatize one of the more serious defects of life-adjustment education.¹

This high praise was repeated by other reviewers, and Getzels and Jackson's primary finding—that high creativity could result in as much increase in academic achievement as could high intelligence (as measured by IQ), even came to be known as the "Getzels-Jackson" effect.²

However, another aspect of this early work interested Jackson more than either the psychometric achievements or the relationship between creativity and achievement, and that was the finding that American teachers—even those at the University of Chicago Laboratory School where the research was carried out—were not especially well disposed to creative children, but preferred children who were compliant or "adaptive." Creativity, then, was found to be sometimes inversely correlated with performance on traditional academic tasks.

This early work raised at least two questions in Jackson's mind: first, whether traditional measures of intelligence were ignoring some important personality attributes of successful individuals; and second, whether schools were unfairly penalizing creative students because they tended to be disruptive or noncompliant. Schools, Jackson theorized, were affected by—and in turn affected—the personalities of students as much as (or more than) their intelligence.

In 1961-1962, Jackson spent a year at Stanford University's Center for the Advanced Study of Behavior. During this year, he found himself spending a lot of time with anthropologists, who were developing new methods of studying the behavior of chimpanzees. Traditionally, animal research consisted mostly of prodding the research subjects with a stick (as Jackson put it later³). Jackson realized that his investigations of the relationship between personality and academic achievement were very much similar to this archaic method. (In one study reported in a 1960 article, Jackson and his colleagues subjected Laboratory Schools students to more than 20 different measures!⁴) Jackson realized he needed a different method if he was going to come to understand the complexities of what goes on in school. The anthropologists had a suggestion: ethnography, or observing behavior in the subjects' "native" setting. Jackson resolved to employ this more naturalistic method upon his return to Chicago.

The result of nearly 5 years of regular observations in several elementary classrooms in a variety of schools in and around Hyde Park was Jackson's most successful and enduring book, *Life in Classrooms* (1968), which has sold more than 60,000 copies and has been translated into more than 10 languages. (It was re-issued with a new introduction in 2000.) In the book, Jackson showed that the routines and expectations of "The Daily Grind" of schooling affect student behaviors and attitudes to an extent that

¹ E. Paul Torrence, "Creativity and Intelligence" [Review], *The School Review* 71:1 (Spring, 1963), p. 112; available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1083243>.

² See, e.g., John Bowers, "Interactive Effects of Creativity and IQ on Ninth Grade Achievement," *Journal of Educational Measurement* 6:3 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 173-177; available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1433770>.

³ See Graydon Megan, "Philip Jackson, U. of C. professor who studied education, dies at 86," *Chicago Tribune* July 24, 2015.

⁴ Philip W. Jackson, Jacob Getzels, and George A. Xydis, "Psychological Health and Cognitive Functioning in Adolescents: A Multivariate Analysis," *Child Development* 31:2 (June, 1960), pp. 285-298; available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1125903>.

can only be described as a “hidden curriculum.”⁵ Jackson’s eclectic methods as discussed in the book epitomized “mixed-method” research and served to give legitimacy to qualitative methodologies.

In his opening chapter of *A Life in Classrooms*, a tribute volume assembled by the participants in a 2003 conference honoring Jackson at Teachers College and NYU, Lee Schulman (one of several distinguished and influential students mentored by Jackson) writes of *Life in Classrooms*:

Jackson taught us to look, to see, to find the patterns and regularities and themes in the buzzing, blooming confusion of everyday life in classrooms. He showed us how to appreciate both the triumphs and the toxicities associated with that world. And perhaps most important of all, he taught us that when one looks and sees and engages with a phenomenon in that way, one becomes obligated not only to understand it, but to care about it.⁶

Jackson did, indeed, come to care very deeply about the dramas that he observed going on in classrooms—so deeply, in fact, that from 1967 to 1970 he served as principal of the University nursery school and from 1970 to 1975 as director of the Laboratory Schools (which also include an elementary school and a high school).⁷

By 1975, Jackson was serving as director of the Lab Schools, chairman of the Department of Education, and Dean of the School of Education at the University of Chicago. In 1974, the decision was made to close the School of Education, in part because of reduced foundation funding available for the training of educational administrators and teachers. (This in itself is an interesting story involving the Coleman Report and the Ford Foundation.) The pending closing of the School raised a sticky issue: what to do with the tenured faculty members in the School. The Department of Education was in the Division of the Social Sciences, and it was primarily devoted to educational research, not the training of practitioners. The faculty of the Division was not keen on inviting the School of Education faculty into the Division, since the requirements for appointments and promotion in the Division were distinctly different. However, a compromise was worked out, which Richard Saller, then Dean of the Division, presented to Jackson in the spring of 1975. Current tenured faculty members in the School would be grandfathered into the Department (and hence in the Division); however, no new faculty members would be tenured in the Department of Education going forward without approval from the “sending discipline.” That is, math education faculty would have to be approved by the Math department, philosophy of education faculty would have to be approved by the Philosophy department, and so on. Jackson vehemently objected. Departments of education, he said, relied strongly on faculty in non-disciplinary fields such as curriculum studies, elementary education, and secondary education. What “sending discipline” would approve those tenure applications? But the decision had been made. In protest, Jackson resigned from all three of his administrative appointments. At the time, he said later, he predicted that this would mean the eventual end of the Department of Education, since it could no longer tenure people in the broad field of education. The decision to close the Department in 2001, made by a committee appointed

⁵ Jackson is credited with coining the phrase at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hidden_curriculum and elsewhere. It first appears in his published writings in his “The Student’s World,” *The Elementary School Journal* 66:7(April, 1966), pp. 345-357.

⁶ David T. Hansen, Mary Erina Driscoll, and René V. Arcilla (eds), *A Life in Classrooms: Philip W. Jackson and the Practice of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press; 2007), pp. 7-8.

⁷ See Philip W. Jackson, “Lonely at the Top,” *The School Review* 85:3 (May, 1977), pp. 425-432.

by then-Provost Saller in 1995, fulfilled Jackson's prediction. (Education has, since, been reinvigorated at the University of Chicago through its Urban Education Institute, but that's another story.)

In the 1970s and 1980s, Jackson turned himself into a preeminent scholar of curriculum, which for him involved looking at the big picture of schooling and education. His distinction between the "mimetic" and "transformative" traditions of teaching that he makes in an essay published in *The Practice of Teaching* (1986) may well be Jackson's second most important contribution to curriculum theory (the first being the hidden curriculum).⁸ Jackson's interest in curriculum theory reinforced the long-term move he was making from empirical to philosophical work.

Jackson's preeminence as an educational researcher is epitomized by his tenure as President of the American Educational Research Association in 1989-1990. During that time, he also took on the task of editing the monumental *Handbook of Research on Curriculum* (1992). Jackson's influence as a Dewey scholar is evidenced by his service as President of the John Dewey Society in 1996 and 1997.

How Jackson became a Dewey scholar an interesting story in itself. Jackson used tell how, when he was promoted to Laboratory Schools director and was moving into his office, he found, in the very back of a closet in the director's office, facing the *back* of the closet, a famous bust of John Dewey by Jacob Epstein (1927). (Dewey, of course, had founded the University Elementary School in 1896.) The image of Dewey sent to stand in the corner, Jackson said, coincided with his sense of how alive (or not) were the ideas of Dewey at the school at that time.



Figure 2: John Dewey, bust, bronze, Jacob Epstein, 1927. This bust now sits in a prominent position outside the Laboratory Schools director's office. Another copy is also on display at Teachers College.

⁸ In her chapter in *A Life in Classrooms*, entitled "The Generalist Educator: Making a Mark on Curriculum Studies," The late Lauren Sosniak catalogs a remarkable number of additional "conceptual inventions" made by Jackson that have had continuing influence in the field. In a way, by being a self-acknowledged auto-didact on curriculum, Jackson saw things that others didn't realize they saw.

Seeking, in part, to restore an appreciation for Dewey to the school (but also to learn more about the purposes of the school for himself), Jackson commenced a project of reading Dewey with members of the school faculty. Jackson quickly learned that Dewey's most interesting writings were not those that were explicitly about education. Rather, it was in Dewey's writings on metaphysics (especially *Experience and Nature*) and aesthetics (especially *Art as Experience*) that Dewey's philosophy seemed to come to fruition. This discovery led to a 25 year quest to discover the implicit linkages between Dewey's work in those philosophical areas and his earlier work on education, culminating in Jackson's 1998 *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* and the publication of his 1999 John Dewey Society Lecture as *John Dewey and the Philosopher's Task* (2002).

Jackson's final book, *What is Education?* (2012) is perhaps the most striking evidence we have of how far Jackson strayed from his early career as a psychometrician, "poking chimpanzees with a stick." In it, Jackson responds to the last paragraph of Dewey's *Experience and Education*, in which Dewey writes:

I do not wish to close without recording my firm belief that the fundamental issue is not of new versus old education nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name *education*.⁹

Jackson's book addresses the question of "What is Education" from the perspective of Dewey, Hegel, Kant, Paul Tillich, and numerous other writers including, characteristically, the poet Wallace Stevens. Jackson's eventual answer is not at all surprising to those of us who knew him:

Education is a socially facilitated process of cultural transmission whose explicit goal is to effect an enduring change for the better in the character and psychological well-being (the personhood) of its recipients and, by indirection, in their broader social environment, which ultimately extends to the world at large.¹⁰

But more important than this definition, Jackson concludes, is the *process* of asking the question "What is Education?" because that process itself is "edifying," taking us "at least for a time," beyond "the boundaries of Dewey's experience-based pragmatism" to speculative metaphysics. By wrestling with conceptual truths at this level, Jackson concludes, we "reaffirm the moral importance of the enterprise, thereby rededicating ourselves to its service."¹¹

Jackson was, more than anything else, a man with a remarkable commitment to serving the enterprise of education through wrestling with conceptual truths. He sought, through his research, writing, and teaching, to "effect an enduring change for the better" in everyone associated with education: teachers, students, administrators, and researchers. He was a brilliant, generous, and wise man, who has left us with an inspirational legacy for reforming not only education, but "the world at large."

⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, Vol. 13 of *The Later Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press; 1938/1991), p. 62.

¹⁰ Philip W. Jackson, *What is Education?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2012), p. 95.

¹¹ Jackson, *What is Education?*, p. 96.