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An interview with Jack Wright in his 80th year

Sean Cameron, Senior EP Surrey and Professional Tutor at UCL and Robert Stratford, Senior Tutor in Educational Psychology at Southampton University, talk to an influential figure in Educational Psychology about contemporary and future issues in the profession.

Jack Wright was a founder member of the Association of Educational Psychologists and was President three times. He was awarded an OBE for services to Special Education in 1975.

Our question: What are some of the 'evergreen' issues which have affected your career and which still seem to predominate in Educational Psychology?

Jack's response: There are a surprising number of these. In particular there is the present preoccupation with 'payment by results'. When I first started teaching in the 1930s, the system of 'payment by results' for teachers was viewed by many educationalists as unfair and immoral. Teachers suffered because of children with learning difficulties who could not help them to achieve the targets which had been set for them.

Psychologists challenged the inappropriate expectation that all pupils could achieve learning targets at exactly the same time and when this was accepted by the Government, the pressure was not only taken off teachers but also off pupils with special needs. As a result, there was an observable and positive change in atmosphere in the classroom.

With the present concern with academic league tables and notions of 'value added' becoming respectable in education once more, we are in danger of seeing all of the problems of the 30s and 40s beginning to resurface. Once again, psychologists will have an important role in modifying some of the problems which may result, particularly if pupils with special needs are going to suffer both overt and covert discrimination in education.

Our question: Who were the major figures of influence for you in Educational Psychology?

Jack's response: I became an EP because I felt it would enable me to offer a worthwhile service to teachers and children. Early on in my teaching career, I came in contact with a lecturer, John Friend, who introduced me to psychology as a way of improving my teaching skills. He regarded psychology as a valuable knowledge base for all practising teachers. John Friend was probably the major influence in encouraging me to study educational psychology since, as a result of his enthusiasm and encouragement, I went up to UCL to read psychology. Nearly 60 years later, I still believe, like he did, that teachers find psychology of enormous help in their everyday work with pupils. Bartlett's classic work on 'remembering', particularly his ideas on 'effort after meaning' was exciting reading for me at this time.

I also remember being particularly inspired by Professor Fred Schonell when I attended the first course which he organised for teachers at Goldsmith's College in 1938, the title was 'Backwardness in the Basic Subjects'. John Bowlby's work on 'attachment' was another important professional influence as was J. A. Hadfield's classic pre-war publication *Psychology and Mental Health*. Grace Rawlings introduced me to the British Psychological Society.
The work of McDougal, particularly his Instinct theory, aroused my curiosity and interest, however it was Cyril Burt, a psychologist who was heavily influenced by Darwinian theory, who got me interested in the genetic basis of ability, and who helped me to begin some research in this area. Unfortunately, the Second World War came long and stopped my early research efforts in their stride.

Oddly enough, I was able to continue my contact with Burt after I had joined the Royal Artillery as I was posted to Aberystwyth to undertake an extended training course on the use of the Bofors gun and found to my amazement that University College staff and undergraduates had been evacuated to the same town!

Our question: How did you finally get into Educational Psychology?

Jack's response: After the war, I returned to teach in East Ham but was asked by the Education Authority to become involved with the standardisation of the Eleven-Plus selection procedure which was then used to ensure that all able pupils (and not just those from the most affluent families) had an opportunity to receive a grammar school education. My work there was obviously seen as valuable and as a result, I was offered a chance by the Chairman of the Education Committee to train as an educational psychologist at the Child Guidance Training Centre.

I worked as the first Psychologist in East Ham, a senior Educational Psychologist in Southend and then joined the Portsmouth Service as Senior (later Chief) Educational Psychologist in 1958. In 1973 in the run up to Local Government reorganisation, I was appointed Principal for the new County of Hampshire where I worked until my retirement in 1980.

Our question: What do you see as your greatest single achievement as an educational psychologist?

Jack's response: Portsmouth in the 1960s and early 70s was a very exciting place to work in. What my team and myself succeeded in doing was encouraging the development of multi agency team work on behalf of children, parents and teachers, and also carrying psychology to teachers, health visitors, medical officers, probation officers and many other related disciplines. In Portsmouth, we also had a wide variety of pre-school units where children who had difficulties could be admitted early for help and become part of a system where they were carefully tracked and monitored throughout their educational career.

In 1974, when Portsmouth (and Southampton) were incorporated into the ‘new’ Hampshire where I was appointed head of the School Psychology Service, there were many opportunities to make sure that psychology had a major impact throughout the largest English county. Yet there were also drawbacks since it meant that I did not have the intimate contact with the County Education Officer and Senior Officers that I'd had in Portsmouth. On top of this, although the declared intention was to take the ‘best’ of the Portsmouth and Southampton services and to extend these features into the wider Hampshire environment, this didn't really happen because the financial cutback season had begun.

It would be fair therefore to say that I had more personal and professional satisfaction and felt that I achieved more during the decade that I spent working for Portsmouth than I did in the much larger county of Hampshire.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that 20 years later, history is on the verge of repeating itself, since following the Local Government Review decision, both Portsmouth and Southampton may again emerge as self-governing unitary authorities.

Our question: What is your major disappointment about the development and impact of educational psychology?

Jack's response: I really cannot point to any particular disappointment. As a profession, psychologists have done remarkably well. Psychology is popular with the public, educational psychology contributions are generally valued by teachers and psychologists are having an increasing degree of influence at an organisational level in education authorities.

Indeed, if I was choosing a career today, I should probably want to enter educational psychology!

Our question: What positive developments in educational psychology do you hope for or predict in the next decade?
Jack's response: As a society we need to find a way of cutting through the present competition for resources between different sections of the Local Authority and work to get adequate financial support for people who need it.

I would like to see psychologists encouraging the development of a brand new organisation for meeting the needs of children. Such an organisation would like Mia Kellmer-Pringle's vision for the National Children's Bureau, involve co-operation between health, social services, education and voluntary societies. It might even be supported by a 'Ministry for Children' set up by the Government: after all, our children are the most valuable resource that this country possesses because they represent our future as a viable society.

I'd also like to see psychologists involved in helping pupils to think clearly and to evaluate what they are taught ie to be able to recognise propaganda and to be able to evaluate how worthwhile certain aspects of society are (or are not).

In a rapidly changing environment, I believe that 'learning to learn' is more important than learning facts. I would like to see psychologists involved in equipping young people with strategies to enable them to cope with rapid change.

Educational Psychologists also have a very important part to play in motivating (or occasionally re-motivating) pupils in the classroom and it is my belief that this is best done through the development and enhancement of pupils' self-esteem. Psychologists could enable educationalists to ensure that the self-esteem and self-worth component in the curriculum was seen as a major rather than subordinate curriculum issue. One particular way in which some of this work could be done is reintroducing the notion of 'voluntary service' as a social motivator. It would be gratifying to see an era emerge where giving help to other people was actually seen as a high status activity and developing the concept of 'service before self' was a major feature of the school curriculum.

Finally, as someone about to become an octogenarian, I would like to think that psychologists could help administrators and policy makers to learn from the past when making or attempting to make educational changes. That way we could not only learn from, but actually benefit from, our previous mistakes!

Summary of Curriculum Vitae

Hubert John (Jack) Wright  Born 25th April 1915 in Bath, Somerset
Educated: City of Bath Boys’ School, College of St Mark and St John and University College London
Trained in Educational Psychology at Tavistock Clinic (1947-48)
First Educational Psychologist in East Ham (1948 until 1951)
Senior Educational Psychologist in Southend on Sea (1951 until 1958)
Senior Educational Psychologist, Portsmouth School Psychological Service in 1958 and later Chief Educational Psychologist for the city (until 1973)
Founder member of Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) and first President (1962) (Jack Wright was AEP President on two subsequent occasions)
BPS representative on Soulbury Negotiating Committee (1960-1962)
AEP representative on Soulbury Negotiating Committee (1962-1975) (with Conrad Graham)
Awarded Fellowship of British Psychological Society (1961)
Awarded Birmingham University Priorsfield Fellowship (first time awarded) (1973)
Awarded Order of the British Empire (1975)
Retired from PEP post in Hampshire (1980)

Major Publications