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To cite this article: Amy N. Sojot & Liz Jackson (2022): 'No single way takes us to our different futures': An interview with Liz Jackson, Educational Philosophy and Theory, DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2022.2045949](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2045949)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2045949>



Published online: 14 Mar 2022.



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INTERVIEW



## 'No single way takes us to our different futures': An interview with Liz Jackson



Liz Jackson is Professor of Education and Head of Department of International Education at the Education University of Hong Kong. Liz served as the President of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia (PESA) from 2018–2020 and became a PESA Fellow in 2021. Additionally, Liz is Deputy Editor for *Educational Philosophy and Theory* and is Editor for the Routledge book series, *New Directions in the Philosophy of Education*. The journey to her current location in Hong Kong has taken a global path. Liz received her bachelor's degree at Portland State University in Oregon and her Master's degree in philosophy of education at Cambridge. She then completed her PhD at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. During this time and after, her work brought her to Turkey, Scotland, Mexico, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates, and South Africa, all experiences that have helped inform her approach to doing educational research.

Liz's contributions to the field are vast. Her scholarship rigorously examines the underpinnings of identity with particular emphasis in the philosophy of education and global studies in education. This focus allows Liz to consider identity's various facets and how those facets both influence and are influenced by the social and political contexts in which they occur. Her recent work demonstrates a refreshing attention to skilfully excavating the political, moral, civic, social, and emotional dimensions of the human experience, all while being cognisant of how these experiences pertain to the broader educational discourse. Liz's interventions are well-regarded, with each of her first three single-authored books — *Muslims and Islam in US Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism* (Jackson, 2014), *Questioning Allegiance: Resituating Civic Education* (Jackson, 2019a), and *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions* (Jackson, 2020a) — receiving multiple research awards, including the inaugural PESA Book Award and the Critic's Choice Book Award from the American Educational Studies Association (AESA).

The clarity with which Liz uncovers the philosophical, political, and sociocultural habits embedded in education extends beyond her scholarship. She is generous with her time and advice, and recognises that diverse, practical strategies are necessary to address the challenges that remain. One such strategy is this interview series in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* initiated by Liz in 2021 on women, leadership, and philosophy. In the following interview, Liz reflects on the value of developing one's own approach to philosophy of education and research that is authentic, collaborative, generative, and prioritises diverse voices and views. She also shares what inspired her to begin this project, thereby adding further dimension to issues previously discussed in the series (Jackson, 2021a; Jackson & Sojot, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022). Thank you, Liz, for your time, guidance, and insightful responses. This interview is the fourth in the series and has been slightly edited for content and organisation after two rounds of questions between Liz and Amy.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Amy:** What does it mean to you to do philosophy of education and your research at this current juncture?

**Liz:** I feel fortunate that I have been able to define philosophy of education as I like, over time. At the Philosophy of Education Society (PES) and the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (PESGB) there are discussions about field purity and what the field is. Living in Hong Kong where a great deal of western philosophy of education is irrelevant to my work and life, it is more obvious to me than before how exclusive and elitist these debates can be, not to mention unhelpful, when colleagues are expected to make research impacts in the real world for all sorts of reasons (some better than others). As a student, sometimes I was told I was not philosophical enough. This tends to be the case if you write about things that are not interesting to the current leadership, or from a philosophical perspective that is not intuitive to them (Jackson, 2020b).

Being part of PESA and working with *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (EPAT) has been great in relation to these issues. I have learned from Michael Peters (Editor-in-Chief of EPAT) that he also faced similar pressures, although I see him as a leading figure in the field. Now I am in the position after presiding over PESA and as a full professor to say philosophy of education is what I think it is, and what I like to do. The field is not borderless, but I think there's a balance philosophy of education strikes, to address real-world educational concerns, broadly speaking, and connect them with abstract ideas. To do this well is another question—but that's what it is.

**Amy:** In doing this series so far, one of the questions that generated vibrant and illuminating responses is a question that you posed to Felicity, Nesta, and Tina. So, I'd like to turn your question to you: What did you want to be or do when you were growing up?

**Liz:** From a young age, I wanted to be a school teacher. I came from the 'wrong' side of town, from a broken home with uneducated elders around me. Although I loved to please my teachers and compete intellectually, I saw most of the kids like me did not have a chance to succeed. The teachers seemed to punish them for not being working or middle class, for not coming to school eager and ready to learn, for not valuing education. This is not the fault of children coming from impoverished backgrounds whose parents did not benefit much if at all from education; nasty, elitist teachers just make it worse. So I wanted to be a teacher, as I was sure, when I compared myself to my teachers, that I could help make schools places for opportunities rather than for justifying failures and inequities. That was the situation, until I started learning more about education and its systematic nature as an undergraduate studying teacher education.

**Amy:** Was higher education an expectation?

**Liz:** When I was graduating from high school, it was an ideal for almost all young people in the states. However, probably less than half of the students I graduated with completed a bachelor's degree. I personally was dying to get out of dodge and fell in love with higher education and everything I associated with it—adulthood, living in the 'big' exciting city of Portland, Oregon,

independence. I managed to get enough scholarship and work-study funding to complete my undergraduate studies in social sciences (for teacher education) at Portland State University, a public university that did not have a great reputation at that time. But my family was not happy about me taking out \$40,000 in loans to study for a Master's degree in philosophy of education at Cambridge! As none of them had travelled outside North America or completed postgraduate studies, they thought I was crazy. My aunt accused me of lying about attending Cambridge for years! Ditto regarding my more costly doctoral studies (I discuss this more in Jackson, 2021b).

**Amy:** From Oregon to Hong Kong is quite the journey! Can you elaborate more on your path to doing research in education? How has this journey—especially your vast experience doing international work in England, Turkey, Scotland, Mexico, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates, and South Africa—influenced your career and approach to scholarship?

**Liz:** I always wanted to go far from home and explore. My first opportunities were as an undergraduate. In Turkey, I taught summer camp to American children of Air Force officers stationed at Incirlik and headed east on missions in 2002—9 months after September 11, 2001. (So they were mostly headed to Afghanistan.) I did not choose Turkey, but I was pleased to be placed there, having pursued Islamic and African Studies. This experience changed my life and worldview. What I had learned about Islam before, even in university, was disconnected from life in eastern Turkey, where at that time most people were not fundamentalists. The next year, I went to Mexico by myself, taking buses from Portland all the way to Mexico City, with a paper map provided by a professor, to volunteer at an indigenous school.

After that, I became committed to going abroad for my Master's. My experiences in Turkey and other travels in the Middle East influenced me to return to the states after that, during the Second Iraq War, to do my PhD research on Islamophobia in US education and media (Jackson, 2014).

Just as I became disenchanted with school teaching after learning more about education as a system, I also became demoralised about higher education while completing my PhD and applying for jobs. After my PhD I joined the Peace Corps in South Africa, working in rural areas in policy development. I thought this would be more meaningful than work in the ivory tower. My advisor, Nick Burbules, discouraged me then; he was afraid, I think, that I would throw away my PhD. So it was a risk. And it did not go well. I missed research and evidence-based practice. I witnessed horrific corruption and systematic, structural injustice and violence, which I was powerless to do anything about (see Jackson, 2013). After that, I was not sure what to do and took the first interesting job I was offered—I found myself in Abu Dhabi, managing policies across 17 men's and women's colleges throughout the United Arab Emirates, all part of the Higher Colleges of Technology. It was a good job in many ways. Still, I missed research. I kept publishing throughout the years, but it was hard when I lived in a mud hut with poor internet access in South Africa, and when it was part of my downtime in Abu Dhabi.

When I interviewed for my first job in Hong Kong 10 years ago, I had never studied or been to East Asia, but what I had learned about Africa and the Middle East in university was not the whole story, either. I think I said as much in my interview. Now Hong Kong is home. These days the Covid travel restrictions here have me yearning to get on a plane—that's where all the good stuff starts for me! I still retain a romantic view about travel. I had travelled to 62 countries prior to 2020, for conferences and other work or leisure. However, now the possibility of being trapped outside Hong Kong keeps me more rooted than ever before.

To say something more philosophical, I have come to realise over time that I am one of those 'rootless cosmopolitans' that people accused Martha Nussbaum of being (although I don't think she ever was). I never felt particularly 'at home' growing up; I don't feel 'at home' in the states, and I never saw any reason to be more loyal or attached to that place or 'imagined community' than another. I saw astonishing kindness in rural Mexico and Turkey, on travels in Tunisia and Egypt, and know there is evil in every corner of the globe, too. Sometimes I think that dispositionally I was bound to find home in East Asia; I was never gifted in or impressed

by aggressive, proud argumentation still in vogue in the field in the states and United Kingdom. That helps me fit in here! Or perhaps, after a lot of cross-cultural work around the world, I am simply most comfortable in a highly diverse society where I am allowed to be unique.

**Amy:** Reflecting on your intellectual influences, which scholars or ideas do you find yourself coming back to?

**Liz:** Ever since my Master's thesis, I have had a sentimental feeling about Kant's liberalism and Charles Taylor's politics of recognition, but after many years outside western academia I find current debates about liberalism and communitarianism outdated and irrelevant. I also started out fascinated by Martha Nussbaum, but she and I have taken divergent paths; I regard her recent work as paternalistic and white-washing (see Jackson, 2020a). I still have a fondness for many insights of Foucault. I have also always been influenced by the foundational perspectives on difference of Fazal Rizvi and Cameron McCarthy, who were both part of my doctoral committee, and Stuart Hall, whose work on media I was introduced to by Cameron. My latest heroes are Sara Ahmed and Megan Boler, for their work on the politics of emotions.

**Amy:** Speaking of emotions, congratulations on receiving the AESA Critic's Choice Book Award for *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions* (Jackson, 2020a)! Your work is critical, thorough, and stimulatingly multifaceted. In the past three years, you have published two other books in addition to *Beyond Virtue—Contesting Education and Identity in Hong Kong* (Jackson, 2021c) and *Questioning Allegiance: Resituating Civic Education* (Jackson, 2019a)—which also received the AESA Critic's Choice Book Award—among other numerous publications. How would you describe your own research and scholarship?

**Liz:** Thank you for your kind words! In the past I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to be a philosopher of education and do it well and keep a good job, rather than carving out my own place. But my more recent work, like these books you mention, focus on one thing—the diversity of the human experience as it relates to what it means to be a good person. I am fascinated by how everyone justifies their ways of being, based on experiences which are unique to themselves as individuals. To me, this is part of why we have serious conflicts in all societies. Why do some people think x is good while others think y is good? I like this question. Mostly I want to illuminate what I can observe about the world, as I think my experiences lead me to different conclusions than many others in academia—at least in regard to these key questions that I focus on.

**Amy:** Furthermore, your work fearlessly interrogates issues and concepts related to human experience that can sometimes be taken for granted in education, thereby thoughtfully exposing tensions in approaches to identity, philosophy, multiculturalism, social justice, emotions, and civic education. How would you like to think that others could use these insights?

**Liz:** Thanks for this. Most people don't know what they don't know. And this is, if anything, more true for academics, and academic philosophers, than for others. We are an insular group from a global view, and so much energy is spent justifying our own views and perspectives based on internally cherished standards. Here we need more diverse voices in the academy, because what is common sense to most entrenched members of the group is nonsense to most outside. In relation, I hope I can open a window into my own world and how it diverges from that of others, and that as a leader in the field I can learn from others and open the field more for others, so all the old guard can learn.

**Amy:** Do you feel there can be some resistance to one, acknowledging that insularity, and two, trying to mitigate it? For you, what would expanding the field for others look like?

It's funny, because what I just said about our insularity and irrelevance is obvious to me—most people I know outside academia or even our discipline would never read anything I write or find it helpful. On the other hand, I can instantly sense resistance to these ideas from colleagues. I can hear people saying, hey, we're trying, and what about how anti-intellectual society is, and what's so important about impact and outreach, aren't those neoliberal buzzwords? So you raise an excellent question, Amy: what does expansion or inclusion look like?

I don't have a ready-made response, but this is what I can say: Many academics and philosophers of education want to, for lack of a better term, speak back to power. Meanwhile, we desire comrades and strength in numbers. In my experience there's a natural tension between these two, however, the desire to be in a club and speak one's truth. Hopefully this already sounds melodramatic when the club in question is philosophy of education. In any case, I want to ask in seriousness: Why are students in philosophy of education today asked to emulate or write to scholars who grew up fifty (or 100 or even more) years ago? Why are colleagues from Hiroshima asked to illuminate aspects of local education with John Dewey's ideas? I love the history of thought, and I don't want to throw out standards for clear or persuasive expression. But leaders of the field should model more the open-mindedness and vulnerability required of newcomers. Otherwise we shut out other visions of the world and remain hierarchical.

**Amy:** Throughout this series, we've discussed the different challenges that women face in academia, such as gendered expectations of emotional labour, service, and administrative duties rather than an emphasis on research. Have you encountered these expectations, and if so, how did you navigate them? Have there been other unsaid expectations or even assumptions in academia that required similar navigation?

**Liz:** Women are often expected to excel in service work and teaching (Jackson, 2017). I was put into these boxes at the first opportunity. While I was publishing books, I was asked to lead curriculum development, which is not my thing. Still this is happening. One thing I learned is to not excel at service, admin, or teaching at the cost of research. Research comes first. Others like the other stuff. I have also worked to promote an image of myself as a researcher and not a teacher—volunteering for the right committees and awards over others. Because that's what I like to do, and what I find meaningful and engaging.

More generally, I have learned that I have to find meaning and fulfilment internally in relation to what I do and not work to please others, which can be a problem for many women, who are rewarded more for being nice than for being intelligent and self-directed (Jackson 2019b). I feel happier after a day of research than a day of teaching, and (at least in the eyes of students) I teach nearly as well with no prep as I do with a day of prep. So this is how I must do it, to keep my sanity.

But I don't think there is an easy answer to your questions. It's about deciding what matters to you and why. I also remind myself sometimes that they wouldn't pay me for work if I loved every minute of it. The key is not to take things personally or get caught up in or feel trapped by faceless bureaucratic structures. One has to keep a balanced perspective, whether or not they face pressures that are particularly related to being a woman in higher education.

**Amy:** Regarding those unsaid pressures and expectations, one of the most valuable things especially for younger scholars of diverse and underrepresented backgrounds is to connect with mentors in the field to help them navigate these expectations. First, who were your mentors and how did you find them? Second, how do you see yourself mentoring other scholars and why is this meaningful?

**Liz:** My undergraduate mentor Candyce Reynolds is still active, and we're in touch. She inspired me to think outside the box about philosophy and justice. At Illinois, my PhD supervisor Nick Burbules also had a major influence on me, particularly his pragmatic approach to political decision making and communication, although I don't think I have admitted that before! And my co-supervisor Fazal Rizvi exposed me to global studies in education, which has been vital for me when philosophy of education is not cosmopolitan enough, or grounded enough, for me.

More recently, I have been working with Michael Peters and Tina Besley in PESA and with EPAT. I admire their commitment to being unique and authentic; their success reassures me that I cannot succeed unless I am true to myself. It is also great to be part of an innovative community, where we aren't debating the same stuff we talked about when I was in

school—instead, we think about how to engage at a time when many feel confined and resigned by external pressures, in relation to getting grants, publishing in ‘high impact’ journals, etc.

**Amy:** I wanted to extend a heartfelt congratulations on the new role you recently entered as the Head of Department of International Education at The Education University of Hong Kong—quite fitting for this series on women and leadership! How would you describe your own leadership style? What three key values inform your leadership philosophy?

**Liz:** Thank you for your congratulations! I rarely think of myself as a leader, and I’m certainly not a ‘charismatic’ leader. As I alluded to earlier, I like to be quiet in groups, although I love being part of a community and contributing. As a leader, I try to listen and collect as much information as possible before I make a decision. In relation, I don’t claim to have the answers, but see myself more as a representative of a group’s decision, even if in reality I am the one making the final call. And I like to think I am the tiniest bit punk rock. What I mean is that I hope that, whether I am working within my department in relation to the faculty and university, or with EPAT in relation to PESA and Routledge, my job is not just to take orders from the top and accept the status quo, but also to communicate to the powers that be about the needs and values of those providing the ‘bread and butter’—those doing the teaching, producing the articles—at the ground level. So I’m taking (and giving) orders, so to speak, from both directions, more as a conduit or bridge than as a manager working on behalf of the top (see Jackson, 2018; 2021d).

**Amy:** Additionally, you are the immediate past PESA President, serving from 2018–2020. What challenges did you face during your role and what successes are you most proud of?

**Liz:** My PESA presidency was difficult. In 2019, I organised the annual conference in Hong Kong. It was an enormous effort. Over 200 people were planning to join us. On the morning I was to send out the final programme (about three weeks before the conference), the anti-extradition law protests finally erupted at the University of Hong Kong, where I lived and worked (and where the conference was to be held). With serious damage to campus and as another nail in the coffin of Hong Kong’s reputation as a safe tourist destination, we had to cancel the conference at the last minute. This was a devastating experience for me personally and professionally (see Jackson, 2020c). In this context, I am just proud that I managed to plan it without paying any booking fees to hotels or restaurants. As I also managed to secure reservation refunds from conference hotels, this meant the Society and its members managed more or less financially unscathed. Since then I’ve noticed some other societies have had more costly conference cancellations and blunders in relation to Covid. And, three years later, many societies around the world still face serious challenges to successfully running an international conference.

I am also proud of some developments of the Society that took off while I was President—initiatives around making the Society more open for all, related publications in EPAT on harassment in the field, and the launching of PESA Agora as a venue for ideas and debate at a broader level (see Besley et al., 2021; Besley et al., 2022).

**Amy:** Did your experience serving as PESA President impact your approach to leadership?

**Liz:** I definitely learned more about leadership from being PESA President. I learned about the diverse work styles we have. This is why I remain so fascinated by the diversity of human experience and what it means to do or be ‘good’. I learned it is important to understand group dynamics as well as how each member of a community sees their self within it. I do not think I am particularly gifted at leadership, but the experience helped me see things from different perspectives.

**Amy:** Well, I think you are a very capable leader. I remember being impressed with how you deftly navigated the Society through the 2019 conference cancellation as well as the start of the pandemic. And even amidst those challenges, the Society created notable opportunities for meaningful connection. Reflecting on, as you said, ‘the diversity of human experience’, what

discussions or developments are currently emerging in education that you find encouraging and even possibly exciting?

**Liz:** I am glad to see the field opening up more. It seems like when I was starting out it was mostly treated as unproblematic that most colleagues were white and the majority of leaders were men. I'm glad people like me are not at all deviant now, and that there is greater awareness of the challenges minorities face generally due to biased and discriminatory historical and ongoing status quos (e.g. Jackson & Muñoz-García, 2019).

**Amy:** Alternatively, what issues do you think remain under discussed?

**Liz:** I would like to see more discussion in the field about challenges in higher education which is not only theoretical but also strategic. Many put forward criticisms about the nature of publishing today, grant competition, etc., but often these are read by colleagues as whining. I think there could be big grants for exploring the problems with big grants, for example, and philosophers are in a good position to be co-investigators if not primary investigators on such a project. I would also like to see western philosophy of education open up much more to non-western views, and I have been working in this direction myself (e.g., Jackson, 2020c; Nesterova & Jackson, 2022; Opiniano et al., 2022). It is unfortunate that most western philosophers of education are largely oblivious to the vibrant philosophical traditions and scholarly communities in Japan, the Philippines, and China, for example. How can one hold anything remotely approaching a global or even broad view of education or philosophy in this case?

**Amy:** I appreciate your acknowledgement that practical strategies are also necessary in these conversations. To turn this to the current project, what inspired you to begin this series on women, leadership, and PESA?

**Liz:** In my career, I have often felt like I was missing out on mentorship by women, as most of my supervisors and senior colleagues have been men. Initially, I hardly noticed. But over time I sought mentorship from women, because I realised I faced different experiences and challenges due to being a woman—for example, by men encouraging me to pursue feminist or women's studies, or assuming I was in that area when I wasn't. More generally, I also sensed something was wrong with higher education if almost everyone around me were men, because I assumed (and still do assume) there is no natural or good reason for this uneven distribution. In relation, when you look at the leadership of our learned societies historically (like PES, PESA and PESGB), it has only been quite recently that women served as presidents.

As I realised that I faced different challenges as a woman in the field, I also began to understand that I had treated some of my woman professors poorly in the past. As I became a professor and starting working with students, I understood how I had taken for granted my woman professors, as my cool, older sisters rather than experts in the field. I also realised that another reason why women may lack women mentors is due to extra hassles women face within academia (to do more service and so on). I started out oblivious, but then awakened to the fact that women scholars have been dealing with so many challenges relative to men for decades, and of course centuries (Jackson & Peters, 2019a, 2019b). All of this made me reflect that across generations there is a great deal of knowledge to share and memories and experiences to explore.

**Amy:** Finally, to wrap up, what is the best advice you have either received or given during the course of your career? Are there any messages would you want to share with readers of this interview, as well as colleagues in philosophy of education?

**Liz:** No advice I could give could be universal, because everyone is different. But if I had a piece of advice based on my own experience, it would be to follow your own path. When I look at my choices, few would have made the same ones, because no one else is me. Following the footsteps of your advisor or mentor (say in your methodology or your career) may look easy, but in the long run forging a new trail will get you more directly to where you actually

want to go. In other words, always question the way of others. No single way takes us to our different futures. If this sounds too abstract, I'll put it another way: the economy, the field, academia, society, politics, technology, the world of ideas—it is all so different now than it was for your mentors and elders, so take their advice about it all with at least one grain of salt.

As for my colleagues, I thank them for reading this. Everyone should have the opportunity to share their story and have others learn from it, and I hope this project can lead to more explorations about who we are beyond our CVs and university webpages. Thanks Amy.

## Notes on contributors

*Amy N. Sojot* is a PhD candidate in the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Using interdisciplinary approaches, Amy's research addresses contemporary educational assumptions through philosophy, political theory, cultural studies, and pop-cultural critique. Her current work uses new materialism to explore how sensations can generate open-ended pedagogies and circumvent constrictive approaches to the body in education.

*Liz Jackson* is Professor of International Education at the Education University of Hong Kong. She is the immediate past president of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia and the former director of the Comparative Education Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong. She is Deputy Editor for *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Her recent authored books include *Contesting Education and Identity in Hong Kong* (Routledge, 2021), *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), and *Questioning Allegiance: Resituating Civic Education* (Routledge, 2019). Her current research is focused on comparative views of emotions and virtues in philosophy and education.

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