A Comparison of the Washington Square Players and Mortimer J. Alder's Paideia Group

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A Comparison of The Washington Square Players and Mortimer J. Alder’s Paideia Group

By

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Abstract

The Washington Square Players evolved as a reaction to the formulaic art of the theatre industry. Mortimer Adler led educational reform by creating the Paideia Group. Both the Players and Adler arise from New York during the Progressive Era. Similar to the Washington Square Players’ declaration to produce “art for art’s sake”, the Paideia Group looked at education for education’s sake. This paper is a comparison of the Washington Square Players and Mortimer J. Adler, the Chairman of the Paideia Group, as nonconformists grounded in democracy, who initiated reform amidst controversy.
Introduction

The Washington Square Players and Mortimer J. Adler’s Paideia Group: could there be two subjects that are more dissimilar? At first glance, the only commonality between them is that the Players and Adler both came of age during the Progressive Era. The Progressive Era gave rise to reforms in all aspects of American culture. One notable transformation was within the theatre. Following the industrial management model, business managers took over the organization of theatre. These managers looked to these titans of industry for a successful financial plan for performance production. This plan consisted of monetary statistics rather than artistic development. It was difficult for an artist to have a performance brought to production that did not conform. Productions became formulaic and predictable. In 1914, a group of theatre enthusiasts evolved into the Washington Square Players as a reaction to this suppression of artistic endeavor. At the same time, Mortimer Adler was disillusioned with his schooling. He left school to work as the secretary to the editor of the New York Sun. The phenomenon of the Washington Players rebellion was covered by the newspapers of the time in New York. Was Mortimer Adler aware of this rebellion as he worked for the Sun? He became interested in writing and entered Columbia University. Did he become a member of the writing community in New York? If so, was he aware of the Washington Players through these connections? Mortimer Adler went on to become a leader in education. In 1982, he answered a call for educational reform creating a band of intellectuals known as the Paideia Group. Similar to the Washington Square Players’ declaration to produce “art for art’s sake”, the Paideia Group looked at education for education’s sake. Both groups sought a revitalization of the roots of their disciplines. Both groups created a declaration of principles, which defined their
existence. Mortimer Alder was living, working, and studying in New York during the time the Washington Players were making their mark on the theatre industry. The connection I will support is that: the Washington Square Players and Mortimer J. Adler, the Chairman of the Paideia Group, were nonconformists grounded in democracy, who initiated reform amidst controversy.

The idea of connecting these two diverse groups was daunting at the onset. I was, however, inspired when I found an anecdote of Adler’s that encompasses this very topic. The anecdote is an example of how two unrelated ideas can complement each other. The story takes place later in Adler’s life while he is vacationing on a cruise through the Panama Canal. Adler was never athletic and had avoided learning how to swim. On this particular day, the heat had driven him into the ship’s pool where he splashed around and was noticed by a fellow passenger. This passenger offered to teach Adler to swim. Adler resisted the passenger’s attempts and was a bit curt in his replies. In an effort to escape the passenger’s continued attention, Adler lied. He made up a story about how the best swimming coaches in the world had been unable to succeed at the task. “Unruffled by my [Adler’s] rude response, he quietly asked, ‘can you hum?’ I replied that of course I could hum; who couldn’t?’ That’s all you need to be able to do,’ he then astonished me by saying, because if you can hum, you can swim.’ ....My resistance was down I could no longer refuse his request. He asked me what I could hum, and after some soul searching. I came up with ‘My Country ‘Tis of Thee.’ He then told me to go down to the deep end of the pool, walk down the ladder, keep my eyes open when my head went underwater, and at that moment begin to hum. ‘Hold on to the ladder as you go down to the bottom,’ he said, ‘and stay down until you finish humming. Then let go and see what
happens.’ Still thinking he was making a fool of me, I reluctantly followed his directions. When I finished humming, I let go of the rails of ladder and quickly popped up to the surface, where I managed to stay by holding on to the side of the pool. ‘See,’ my preceptor said with unconcealed triumph in his voice and on his face, ‘you didn’t drown by going underwater; in fact, you couldn’t keep yourself down at the bottom; you popped up the moment you took your hands off the ladder. You can’t swim yet, but now you will be able to learn, because the only obstacle to your learning is your fear of drowning when you put your head underwater, and no one can learn to swim without getting his face and head under, at least part of the time.’ I had to admit that while ‘if you can hum, you can swim’ remained a non sequitur, it had led me to a valid if-then—‘if you can hum, then you can learn how to swim.’ Shortly thereafter I did learn how to swim...’ (Adler, Philosopher At Large 21-22). I had found the first connection, both Adler and the Players let go of their fear to challenge mediocrity.

Therefore, by humming, I let go of my fear and begin the quest of connecting the Washington Square Players with Mortimer J. Adler’s Paideia Group. In order to provide information regarding the climate from which these two parties grew, this introduction includes a brief description of the business of the American Theatre during the Progressive Era and of educational reform in America. The second section is an examination of the Washington Square Players, their development, structure, and philosophy. A section follows covering Mortimer J. Adler and the Paideia Group. It covers aspects of Adler’s life, educational theory, and career as it relates to the Paideia Group, along with the formation of the Paideia Group, their structure, and philosophy. The conclusion compares the Washington Square Players with Mortimer J.
Adler and the Paideia Group, exploring connections between their structures, reforms, and controversies.
Theatrical and Educational Reform: A Brief Background

The Progressive Era, the period from 1890 through the 1920s, allowed for a freedom of thought and innovation that had yet to be experienced in the United States. The Era was overflowing with scholars in every field questioning the status quo; innovators, Henry Ford for example, were literally driving humanity forward. Inevitably, a period of intellectual growth brings controversy and debate. W.E.B Dubois was opening the eyes of American society to civil rights and the role of the black man in American History. Margaret Sanger battled the medical, political, and religious establishments regarding a woman’s ability to control reproduction. Upton Sinclair exposed the working conditions of the average person in *The Jungle*. In the world of theatre, opportunities for the audience began to abound. An audience member could choose between the theatre, ballet, vaudeville, burlesque, and opera. This signified the birth of the entertainment industry. Artists such as Ethel Barrymore and Richard Mansfield became popular, giving rise to today’s ‘celebrity’ (Houghton Mifflin 3). The concept of the hero changed to reflect the icon of success. Audiences became enamored with the actor’s personality and lifestyle. With the advances in mass media, details of these American stars were available in detail. Growth in industry created the field of business management. This specialized field organized people and resources; the expertise was in the management not the product. Prior to this period, an actor manager ran the typical American theatre troupe, giving the actor full creative control. Industry had created a model of management that was proving successful. Theatre-booking agencies saw the financial advantage of creating a business model for the theatre. Selling seats become the primary focus. Creative development of the artist was
secondary, if considered at all. This rise of the businessman caused controversy within American theatre.

At the end of the 1800's, the traveling theatrical companies had grown from the actor-manager maintained “stock” company, local actors and artists who supported the visiting star, to the star-actor creating a traveling company in order to keep the performances more consistent. This shift created the opportunity for the positions of assistant manager or advance agent to handle the complicated details of finding theatres, room, board, and non-portable items to support the production. They either contacted a booking agent, who worked as an independent to garner a deal at a limited number of theatres; or made direct contact with the theatre. The contracts were little more than a handshake; even the paper contracts were not binding (Turney). In theory, this allowed the actor-manager to devote more of his time to his art. In reality, this opened the door for a divide between the art and the business of the art. The actor-manager was no longer the sole voice of the company. In order to accomplish the momentous task of mounting a production, the assistant manager or advance man would find himself in the position of loaning funds to the actor-manager. An organization known as the Syndicate became quite adept at these practices and soon dominated the theatrical arena. The artist did not succumb to this dominion willingly. Francis Wilson, an opponent of the Syndicate, questioned the Syndicate’s motives. He confronted the Syndicate with trying to control the actor. The Syndicate responded, “What, take possession of that which had always belong to him! Dominate the drama? Never!... The Syndicate was formed to protect some “minor financial interests” (Turney).
In Daniel Frohman’s ‘The Birth of the Syndicate’, he provides the opposite side of the story. He describes the disorganization of the theatre industry through the eyes of his brother Charles Frohman. Charles had his hand in a number of financial endeavors: the Empire Stock Company, a chain of theatres and a booking agency in the west to name a few. He became frustrated when his production of *Shenandoah*, though popular with the public and still filling the seats, was closed to allow another production to begin (Turney). It was following this experience that Charles met with A. L. Erlanger and Marc Klaw, who had theatrical interests in the south, Samuel F. Nixon and J. Fred Zimmermann, who were involved with a number of theatres in Philadelphia, and Al Hayman who owned part of the Empire Theater. According to Daniel Frohman’s account, the conversation became one of managing theatrical business and how to save the theater from financial ruin. Within a short period of time following this meeting these men standardized theatre booking in America (Turney).

By combining their efforts, the Syndicate was able to control the routes a company traveled from city to city. Unless the company became part of the Syndicate, it was not allow to play at any of their houses. A company could find a second-class house to play in, their profits, however, would be effected. The owner of the second-class house was reluctant to raise prices in fear the house would lose its regular patrons. In some towns and cities, a play house wasn’t available to rent as the venues were all part of the Syndicate. Actors took to alternate forums, Sarah Bernhardt played under a tent in an effort to stay independent (Turney). Some of the influential actors of the time spoke out against the Syndicate. William Dean Howells stated, “Not merely one industry, but civilization, itself, is concerned, for the morals and education of the public are directly influenced by the stage. Every one who takes
pride in the art of his country must regret a monopoly of the theatre, for that means ‘business’ not art” (Turney). James Herne commented, “The underlying principle of a Theatrical Trust is to subjugate the playwright and the actor. Its effect will be to degrade the art of acting, to lower the standard of the drama and to nullify the influences of the theatre” (Turney). Despite their gallant principles, the actors were not able to organize as efficiently as the businessmen of the Syndicate. The Syndicate managed the news media deftly, ensuring the plays in their houses received rave reviews and publicity. The independent actors couldn’t compete and found themselves in financial jeopardy. Many, out of concern for their families, succumbed to the Syndicate in one way or another (Turney).

At this time Theodore Roosevelt was becoming a force in American politics. He believed in a “Square Deal” for Americans, was determined to bring about a more equitable society. Roosevelt attacked corporate monopolies (Black, Hopkins et al.). Under Roosevelt, the common person felt powerful. The Shubert brothers symbolize this rise of the common person. Lee, Sam, and Jacob J. Shubert were born in Syracuse New York. The family was not wealthy, requiring all three to seek employment at an early age to support the family. Although not performers, they rose up the theatre ranks, from ushers to owners. They bought non-Syndicate theatres throughout the country. The Shuberts courted the company managers and offered competition for the Syndicate that the actor-manager did not have the business expertise to coordinate. The Shuberts and the Syndicate ultimately combined their businesses. It is arguable whether this merger had broken the monopoly or strengthened it (Turney).
With the control of the theatre in the hands of businessmen, the artist became frustrated. The productions became formulaic; the craft of theatre was not growing. Susan Campbell, an early member of the Washington Players and founding member of the Provincetown Players, captured the artist’s sentiment when she stated, “We went to the theatre and for most [sic] part wished we had gone somewhere else....Plays...were patterned. They might be pretty good within themselves, seldom out to—where it surprised or thrilled your spirit to follow. They didn’t ask much of you, those plays. Having paid for your seat, the thing was all done for you, and your mind came out where it went in. Only tireder [sic]....What was this “Broadway,” which could make a thing as interesting as life into a thing as dull as a Broadway play?” (Kramer 154). The potential for financial success became the emphasis of the theatrical experience. It was inescapable that in this environment, like-minded intellectuals would seek each other out. Greenwich Village became the center of creative thinking in New York. The Liberal Club at 133 McDougal Street became a regular meeting place. The group grew and soon the owners of the Club and The Washington Square Book Shop next door decided to create an opening between the two establishments in order to accommodate the number of participants (Kramer 152). The group discussed topics of reform, “individual freedom, free love, socialism, avant garde literature and futuristic painting” (Kramer 150). As Helen Deustch and Stella Hanau, members of the Provincetown Players, commented, “with so many arts represented, drama was the natural meeting ground, the inevitable medium of expression” (Kramer 150). The people involved in this theatre movement were from various fields, few were members of the professional theatre; as the ideas were radical in theme and presentation. Ideas began to formulate that these individuals should form their own theatrical
troupe, one “based on their artistic and social beliefs and discontent with the available mainstream theatre” (Kramer 150). Inevitably, in 1914, The Washington Square Players were born.

Mortimer J. Adler and the Paideia Group were called into action by a similar threat to their livelihood. The federal government was encroaching onto their stage, the classroom. The government was taking steps to transform the art of teaching into the business of education. This encroachment took place slowly over several decades. As in theatre, interest in education heightened during the Progressive Era. The Progressive Era was so named because of the reforms generated in America during that time. America was questioning the status quo and looking to improve quality of life for all Americans. As the decade of the 1970s ended, America was once again questioning the quality of life its citizens were experiencing. The decade would come to be called the ‘Information Age’, which gave way to the cultural concerns of the eighties, known as the ‘Age of Social Transformation’ (Guthrie and Springer 15). Prior to this time, a citizen could achieve the American Dream simply by completing elementary school. The technical advancements of the seventies had made it necessary for the average person to finish high school and beyond in order to secure a job. These jobs required a higher technical skill. Unlike earlier eras, “Material comfort and personal fulfillment were now more tightly tied to the acquisition of higher levels of education” (Guthrie and Springer 15). The growing belief that increased education was providing greater wealth brought an increased scrutiny of the public school system. Soon the achievements, or lack of achievements by the public school system were being linked to all of America’s ills, social, technological and economic; a link that sparked
the call for educational reform and led to the establishment of the 1981 Commission on Excellence in Education.

The American government addressed the importance of education for its citizens early in the country’s development through the formation of the public school system. “James Madison said: ‘The establishment of a republican government without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people is the most rash and foolhardy experiment ever tried by man’” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 104). The federal government left the implementation and administration of the education system in the hands of the state and local government. Education reform in America is categorized into three periods. “The first period of early reform-report activity, includes the few reports generated in the United States up until the late nineteenth century. The second period, the era of Progressive reforms, roughly covers the late nineteenth century up until the 1980s. The final period, the era of the modern reform report, began in the early 1980s” (Ginsberg). The roots of the Paideia Group, a group of scholarly individuals created in the late 1970’s, span back in time through these periods.

It was during the first period that Horace Mann came to prominence. Mann held the office of secretary for the State Board of Massachusetts from the late 1830s through the 1840s. Mann’s reports were considered significant because he called for a standardization of schools. He brought attention to such issues as teacher training, the need for libraries, and the moral purpose of school (Ginsberg). The Paideia Group dedicated their reform plan, The Paideia Proposal to Mann. The Group embraced Mann’s vision that education was the foundation of
equality in a democratic society (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 71). This information gathering and the resulting awareness of educational issues ushered in the next period, the period of Progressive Reforms. A number of committees and commissions were established during this time. President Harding proposed a department of Education and Welfare at the federal level in 1923. It was not until the administration of Eisenhower that this proposal for programming at the federal level was recognized. Eisenhower created the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1953. He specified the duties of each branch. “The Office of Education collects, analyzes, and distributes to school administrators throughout the country information relating to the organization and management of educational systems. Among its other functions is the provision of financial help to school districts burdened by activities of the United States Government” (Eisenhower). By forming an executive level department, Eisenhower created an avenue for the administration of education by the federal government. His hope was to “ensure the maintenance of responsibility for the public educational system in State and local governments while preserving the national interest in education through appropriate Federal action” (Eisenhower).

In the late 1970’s, President Carter took up the case of federal recognition of education issues. During his address on February 10, 1978 to the directors of National Education Association he stated, “There’s an inherent partnership between those who serve in government at all levels and those who teach our students, both young and old” (Carter). Carter proposed an increase in fiscal support from the federal government to assist the state and local educational systems. He pushed the political envelop further by separating the Departments of Health and Welfare from Education. He created the Department of Education,
which then required its own cabinet level position in 1979. This was the beginning of education as a campaign issue. Republicans and Democrats were split down the aisle on the constitutionality of the Department of Education. Republicans felt the formation of a cabinet department was unfounded in the Constitution; that it violated state rights and was a misuse of federal funds. President Ronald Reagan’s campaign included eliminating the department, the institution of a tuition tax credit and re-establishing prayer in school (Guthrie and Springer 27).

The political campaigns for 1980 presidential election brought further attention to the educational system. In the midst of the cold war, high inflation, and social disillusionment, America was looking for answers. Reports generated from standardized tests indicated a decline in the scores of American students while those of other industrialized countries, such as Japan were on the rise. These same countries were also experiencing a growth of economic strength. The natural assumption was to link education to the rise or fall of a nation (Guthrie and Springer 21). Reagan won the election and set to work trying to minimize the importance of education in national politics. Early in his tenure, Reagan appointed Terrell Bell as the Secretary of Education. Bell, as a professional educator and longtime proponent of public education, was a curious choice to lead the charge to eliminate the Department of Education from the presidential cabinet. Bell performed his duty and set forth to prepare a proposal for the removal of his department. Part of the plan included the formation of a committee to report the success of the American school system. President Reagan was not inclined to appoint such a commission so Bell made the appointments himself. It was called the Commission on Excellence in Education. Bell presented them with the task of advising the president on the issue of education (Guthrie and Springer 11).
At this time, Mortimer J. Adler and his colleagues were reading these reports with skepticism and experiencing frustration in their classrooms. Although they agreed with many of the findings, this aggregate of educational professionals was not satisfied with the recommendations being offered by the various agencies and associations generating the reports, so they set forth to offer their own remedy to the plight of the American public school. The remedy published in 1982, was called the Paideia Proposal. This proposal marked the beginning of the period of modern educational reform in America (Ginsberg). “Such deep and legitimate concerns are addressed by our proposal for the reform of public schooling in America. The reform we seek is designed to improve the opportunities of youth, the prospects of our economy, and the viability of our democratic institutions. It must be achieved at the community level without resorting to a monolithic, national educational system; it must be, in Lincoln’s words, of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Adler, The Paideia Proposal An Educational Manifesto). The Paideia Proposal was the herald for parity in education. The Paideia Group defined that parity as equality in quality as well as quantity for all students. Reagan was unsuccessful in minimizing the debate of education on the national level. George W. Bush continued the national conversation when he instituted the ‘No Child Left Behind Act’. President Obama keeps the issue alive with his remarks on July 18, 2011, reflecting the Paideia Group’s Policy of a quality education for all children. He stated,” ... we’re working together to put an outstanding education within reach for every child" (Obama).
The Washington Square Players

The evolution of business led to the formation of the Washington Square Players. Business moguls in the 1890s, such as the Rockefellers, had refined their practices. These business practices facilitated the rise of the ‘Trust’, a large segment of industry that combines to form a monopoly. It was far from unexpected that the managers and financiers of the theatre would strive to adopt similar arrangements. As the businessman perfected the art of making money, the art of creating theatre became less of a priority. Walter Prichard Eaton, a drama critic and historian of the Theatre Guild stated: “The ambitious actor or producer who might wish to experiment or to do some fine thing limited in its appeal, either had to do it as best he could, or at his own risk, and often in a poor theatre, or give it up” (Kramer 154). This development of the business of theatre management had supporters; those who felt it would benefit the theatrical community. Most troupe directors, although talented artists, were not proficient in the world of finance. By removing the responsibility of financial management, the artistic director could focus on the art. For others, this development marked the end of theatre as an artistic endeavor. Who have the final vote in a decision, the manager, or the director? The power inevitably belongs to those who control the finances. According to Walter Pritchard Eaton, who chronicled the Theatre Guild, “Without any question this was a severe setback to the development of modern American drama...” (W. P. Eaton 18)? At this time, technological advancements led to the development of motion pictures. Again, the economy of business trumps the desire to develop theatrical art. “Rapidly, and increasingly, the motion pictures took away from the theatre its gallery audiences, and the motion picture houses, too, could be operated in the smaller towns with greater regularity and at a smaller expense. They created a
sudden crisis in the playhouse which our theatre was not organized to meet...whereas they offered little or no competition in poetry, intellectual excitement, social criticism, and other things provided by the drama in its best estate...” (W. P. Eaton 18-19). Theatre managers were even less inclined to risk loss on expensive and untried theatre, when booking the economical, popular film guaranteed a profit.

The intellectual community took a conflicting position, acknowledging theatre as a worthy scholarly pursuit. “It was, indeed, a paradox of the times that when our professional theatre was at a low ebb, our universities had begun to teach play writing and play producing, amateur enthusiasts were banding together, young artists were looking with fascination at the ‘new stage craft’ of Europe, and there was a surge of creative life seeking some sort of an outlet in expression, an outlet the organized theatre did not provide” (W. P. Eaton 19). The students of the time were learning to appreciate, critique, and develop theatre. Theatre was as a reflection or commentary on society, past present and future; and yet the theatre provided for audiences was concerned primarily with financial success. The artist needed to prove the production would bring in capital. “With this atmosphere in and around the mainstream theatre just when enthusiastic young people were looking for artistic outlets, it is certainly no wonder that they would be impelled to found their own companies” (Kramer 155). It was out of this desire that the Washington Square Players was fashioned. The reaction was capture by the New York Tribune, “If the American stage is ever to extend its exhibitions beyond the ‘tired business man’ type of music show and the farces and melodramas which have been such money makers in the last couple of seasons, it will be by reason of the competition of such organizations as the Washington Square Players” (Kramer 168).
Walter Prichard Eaton declared, “The period in which the Players came to life was a very vital one in the theatre...” (W. P. Eaton 210). Business management was the watchword in the United States, but innovative artistic ideas were taking hold in Europe. “Much of what was exciting and new in European culture was allied to the theatre: the new playwriting of the likes of William Butler Yeats, Gabriele D’Annunzio, Harley Granville Barker, James M. Barrie, George Bernard Shaw, Maurice Maeterlinck, Georges de Porto-Riche, and Paul Claudel, the ‘new stagecraft’ of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig: innovative productions by directors like William Poel, Andre Antoine, Max Reinhardt, Alexander Tatrov, Leopold Sulerzhitsky, Aurelien-Marie Lugne-Poe, and Jacques Copeau: and art theatres like Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, the Munich Art Theatre, the Moscow Art Theatre, and Paris’s Theatre du Vieux-Colombier” (Kramer 150). These “Little Theatres” provided a venue for the artist to explore his craft. The youth and intellectuals of America were looking to Europe as a model for politics and culture. New York became a hub of creativity and intellectualism, specifically Greenwich Village. Collectives of individuals from all walks of life would gather to discuss a variety of topics relevant to the time; socialism, anarchism, free love, birth control, and women’s suffrage (Kramer 152). The Washington Square Players emerged from this community. “The first major group of this movement to establish itself independently in New York was the Washington Square Players, founded in 1914 as ‘the outgrowth of a little group that used to foregather in Washington Square, radicals, socialists, progressives, artists, writers, and plain men and women...’” (Kramer 150). In addition to the social topics, the group discussed the theatre of Europe and their frustration with the American Theatre. The conversations moved toward the prevalent playwrights of the time, forming a ‘Little Theatre’ and staging readings of what they considered relevant works.
Researchers differ when describing the exact details of how the Washington Square Players came into being. One detail of unity is “As early as 1912 several artistically-inclined intellectuals including Philip Moeller, an aspiring writer, and Edward Goodman used to meet at the Ethical Culture Society on Central Park West” (Kramer 151). Then the stories of origin begin to vary. According to some, these Sunday night gatherings would focus on the reading of original works and the works of European playwrights. Occasionally, the group performed for the public. “When the group advanced to works by August Strindberg and Arthur Schnitzler, the Society’s director commented discreetly, ‘I think you’ve outgrown us.’ Moeller and Goodman moved their productions to the Socialist Press Club and, joined by Theresa Helburn and patent attorney Langner, also began reading plays by Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and George Bernard Shaw at one another’s homes” (Kramer 151). Another version has the group gathering at “…the Liberal Club at 133 MacDougal Street, ‘a Meeting Place for Those Interested in New Ideas.’ The Club fostered discussion, openness, and ‘wine-and-talk parties’ on Friday nights at a charge of twenty five cents. Some occasions were far more boisterous, such as when the Club presented one-act plays written and performed by its members. This was the germ of the Washington Square Players” (Kramer 150). Either beginning corresponds with the idea the Players stemmed from an intellectual collective and moving toward a form of ‘Little Theatre’. Some researchers claim that the group first began meeting at “a restaurant, the famous ‘Polly’s’” (Mackay 27-28). All the researchers culminate with the Players meeting at the Washington Square Bookshop. The architecture and décor of the shop lent itself to theatrical readings. “Its two large high-ceilinged rooms; its white woodwork; its bookcases; its hundreds of volumes in gay colors lining the walls like a tapestry; its comfortable chairs and lounge; its
hospital open fire – all tended to make it a place to linger in” (Mackay 27-28). One can imagine gathering with contemporaries in such a place for an evening of literary revelry.

According to researchers, The Boni brother’s Washington Square Bookshop was the “exact center of bohemia” found neighboring the Liberal Club. “Attracting few customers, the shop was a gathering place for radical poets and writers such as Reed, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, and Theodore Dreiser. So that the budding artists could more easily mingle with the revolutionary writers and thinkers, a door was cut into the wall adjoining the Liberal Club” (Kramer 152). Consequently, the group acquired their name, the Washington Square Players. As the group’s work grew to include play readings, they felt a change in structure was called for, “The Liberal Club crowd considered forming a performing company and renting a playhouse, but several attempts to find both a suitable and affordable were unsuccessful...A Liberal Club member with some professional theatre experience who happened to be a Harvard schoolmate of Albert Boni’s resolved the matter immediately. Robert Edmund Jones, just returned from a stint in Europe studying stage design with Max Reinhardt, appeared propitiously at the bookstore. ‘Do you have to have a stage to put on a play, Bobby?’ asked Boni. ‘Of course not,’ answered Jones, ‘you can put a play right here.’ So, they did” (Kramer 152).

The Players consisted of a variety of people with all sorts of backgrounds. Some were “artists who viewed the Broadway theatres with some contempt, perhaps, because of the old-fashioned settings and costumes they saw there. Still others were young men who had ambitions to stage plays. Some of these men and women were Hebrews; some belonged to the
much-written-about Greenwich Village Bohemian crowd, some, like Samuel Eliot, Jr., grandson of the president-emeritus of Harvard, were positively Puritanic in antecedents. But one thing they had in common—a love of enthusiasm for the theatre” (W. P. Eaton). Listed among the participants are the “radical journalist John Reed, short story writers Alice Brown and Susan Glaspell, lawyers Lawrence Langner (who specialized in patents), and Elmer Reizinstein (later Elmer Rice), business man Edward Goodman, poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, novelist Floyd Dell, publishers Charles and Albert Boni” who was already mentioned” (Kramer 150). These individuals worked together to, in their own words: “produce new works by American authors and important plays by foreign dramatists that would not otherwise be given a hearing, always maintaining our custom of free experiment without which we believe progress in the theatre to be impossible” (Mackay 37). This inclination to specialize in a certain type of theatre was not unique. It was common for a theatre to market to a certain type of audience. “Many theatre troupes of the day had clear biases of various kinds: The Neighborhood Playhouse directed its appeal to the East and Central European and Jewish residents of its Lower East Side home, consequently its repertoire was exclusively European…” (Kramer 156). What made the Player’s unique was their penchant for pleasing themselves. Their concern was not the audience but their art. Hannah White, a journalist for The Independent, wrote of the Players: “‘Art for art’s sake’ has been quoted as the slogan of the Washington Square Players” (Kramer 157). The focus was on the craft of theatre. This eventually would cause some tension in the group, mainly as to the direction of focus, whether to concentrate on purely American artists or explore the European writers as well. “They hoped to provide a stage for American writers, but they also had a strong interest in European experimental drama which incensed some,
including George Cram Cook who felt the Players were not giving native authors enough of a chance...while the Washington Square Players concentrated on the advancement of production quality and so deliberately and rapidly expanded” (Kramer 156). Eventually certain members splintered off and formed another troupe known as the Provincetown Players.

For their first production the Washington Square Players took on a European piece, Lord Dunsany’s *The Glittering Gate*. This first choice showed the wisdom of the Players. They understood their weaknesses, namely talent and money. As they were not professionals and the purpose was to explore the art, it was vital not to over reach. “The group selected Lord Dunsany’s *The Glittering Gate* as their text for two very practical reasons: it had only two speaking parts and the bookshop had several copies on its shelves” (Kramer 153). The production was described as follows by a critic of the time who realized the limitations of the Players: “…for the production of their experimental one-act play late in autumn of 1914 they took the back room of the store and built a small platform stage. A curtain background was arranged, and a few accessories were improvised by a young man interested in new ideas in scenery, named Robert Edmond Jones....The play was Lord Dunsany’s Glittering Gate. And a Glittering Gate it proved for the Washington Square Players” (Mackay 28)! With this production, the Washington Square Players embarked on a journey to enhance theatre in America.

In order to separate themselves further from the Syndicate of Broadway, the Player’s organized their troupe in a democratic manner. “From the beginning, the Washington Square Players selected their scripts by committee, with every member voicing opinion on the choice
and the casting” (Kramer 162). In order to insure that the group agreed as to their purpose they
developed a manifesto to guide their decision-making. In accordance with the guiding
principles, “The Players’ Manifesto ... placed few restrictions on their repertoire except those of
taste” (Kramer 156). What exactly constituted a ‘tasteful’ selection was undefined. Critics and
some audience members questioned whether their productions were actually tasteful. This was
quite different from the Syndicate concerns. This commitment to their ideals would cause
logistical difficulties as the group grew and tried to compete with the Broadway theatres. In
1929, Walter Pritchard noted the importance of the politics in the manifesto when he
documented the Theatre Guild’s history (a group which developed from the Players), “Two
things are especially to be noted in this Manifesto: first, the insistence that the Players had no
set policy in the choice of plays, further than to insist on those having ‘artistic merit,’ preferring
American work and giving precedence to dramas ‘ignored by the commercial managers’; and
second, that the theatre was to be ‘democratic,’ with a 50-cent scale, and the inauguration of
season subscriptions.” (W. P. Eaton 20). The Washington Square Players became flooded with
scripts. Artists and audiences were hungry for fresh, innovative productions. The group would
only produce those plays that received a unanimous selection from the group.

The advent of the theatre subscriptions is attributed to the Washington Square Players.
In this manner, the Players adjusted the business model to their needs. Selling tickets for a
season at a time allowed the Player’s freedom to initiate their productions as they desired. “In
order to be as independent as possible from the forces of politics, the Players proposed to
support themselves entirely from ticket sales and, in the first such scheme in the United States,
subscriptions” (Kramer 156). By keeping the price of a ticket to 50 cents, the common man
could attend the theatre. At the time, “One lady remarked: ‘The Washington Square Players please both High-brow and Hofbrau.’ They have shown New York at large that there is something to be found in the theatre beside some of the endlessly commonplace plays of Broadway” (Mackay 35). The success of the Players is accredited to the ingenuity of the subscriptions. “Farsightedness has been one of the keenest contributing factors to this Little Theatre’s success. Mr. Edward Goodman, the director of the theatre, increased membership list by offering the subscribers ‘intellectual inducements.’ These consist of lectures on the drama free to subscribers; and private performances of unusual plays given to the subscribers, from which the general public is excluded” (Mackay 36). Just another example of how the troupe pursued ‘art for art’s sake;’ inviting the audience to be actively engaged in the learning process of the troupe through the lectures. Subtly encouraging discussions regarding the Player’s work would create a marketing buzz, which would increase curiosity and form critically demanding audiences who could inspire the Players artistically. As one commentator described, “It is a theatre which demands that the people in its audience be sympathetic and wide awake. It will not allow them to check their brains with their hats” (Mackay 36).

The Washington Square Players stood out from the rest of Broadway by the choice of programming, primarily one-act plays. It was extremely rare to produce a show consisting of one-acts. “At this period the Washington Square Players had the only theatre in New York which gave one-act plays” (Mackay 29). According to conventional wisdom, the audience wanted a fluid story consisting of a beginning middle and end, as portrayed through four acts. To provide a program of one-acts was risky. “But it [one-act play] has never been popular in our professional theatre, except as a curtain raiser, or afterpiece, to a long play, and most people,
at heart, prefer a long play, even in the amateur theatre, to a bill of four one-act dramas, tolerating the latter only for special reasons” (W. P. Eaton 27). Again, the Players ingenuity in artistry is displayed. The organization of the performances was critical to their success artistically. “... The Washington Square Players have adopted the custom-- and a wise one -- of making their third one-act play dominate the program. In a four-act play, the third act is always the important act. Thus in a program of four one-act plays the third play on the list, if strongest, preserves dramatic unity as if the whole program were a long play” (Mackay 31-32). In this way the tension and drama of the program builds, even as the tension builds and eases during the acts. The big question was would they come? Will the Players have an audience? “And audiences they did have... Frances Hackett of The New Republic, for example, praised the Players for their ‘freshness and audacity that is expected to conquer the lethargic,’ and ‘partly allures and partly intimidates the man who wants to see ‘a good play’” (Kramer 158). The Washington Square Players had become an entity of the American Theatre.

The Players followed a repertory system. Producing new works as well as traditional or adapted works, the scheduled performances followed a strict calendar regardless of box office results. “The repertory system is adhered to even in the face of successes that would make a commercial manager change his mind about long runs. The only ‘run’ the Washington Square Players have permitted themselves was in Bushido, the memorable Japanese tragedy, which saw its one-hundredth performance, ‘the longest run of any one-act play in New York,’ says Alexander Woolcock of the New York Times” (Mackay 36). Choice of venue also distinguished the Players from their counter parts in independent theatre in that, “Unlike the other art and independent theatres of its time, the Players rented legitimate theatres and actively sought
press coverage” (Kramer 157). The Players wished to an alternative to the formula of Broadway; the desire was to prove that audiences wanted to be stimulated by significant art. As a result, “they then leased the Bandbox for the whole season of 1915-1916 and gave the customary eight performances a week instead of four” (Mackay 29-30). The response to the Players during the initial season was tentatively positive, “...on February 19, 1915, the dramatic critics of New York journeyed skeptically over into the unknown regions of East 57th Street, prepared to be bored by one more exhibition of what they sometimes called Uplift...What happened was a surprise, not only to the critics, but to the friends of the Players, who constituted most of that first audience...The acting for the most part, in all the plays, was obviously amateur, even at times fumbling. Certain critics complained of this. But the zest and spirit of the productions, the hushed mood struck by the staging of ‘Interior,’ the youthful spirit of adventure which permeated the playhouse, caught everybody’s fancy” (W. P. Eaton 23-24). Many of the Player’s detractors were “theatre professionals... who represented the same stick-in-the-mud attitudes, exemplified by the state of contemporary Broadway theatre, against which the companies were reacting” (Kramer 150). However, as the Player’s became more popular even the detractors seemed to become entranced.

The question of ticket price and the Players’ financial prospects became fodder for the critics of the day. Were the Players succumbing to the business of theatre? Walter Prichard Eaton of the July 1916 issue of American Magazine wrote, “The Washington Square Theatre started in poverty, and it is comparatively poor yet—thank heaven. We hope it always will be. Then the workers in it will always be its lovers. We don’t want them to work for nothing; but better for nothing than for great riches” (Kramer 156). Others were also impressed with Players
abilities. “One critic, describing the fare as ‘$2 drama for fifty cents...If the Players can keep up their present pace they will make the Bandbox an institution” (Kramer 157). Due to production costs, the Players were unable to keep the ticket price at 50 cents. The success of their first season prompted the move to a larger venue. “The Players had rented the Comedy Theatre because the Band Box was too small to yield sufficient revenue to meet their rising expenses and satisfy their ambitions to employ better actors, nor could they increase their prices in a house so far from Broadway” (W. P. Eaton 26). It was inferred that the troupe was compelled to relocate to Broadway in order to be considered legitimate theatre. “By this time the acting of the Washington Square Players had reached a state where it could be called professional in the true sense of the word. For 1916-1917, the Washington Square Players took the Comedy Theatre, one of the smallest of New York’s playhouses in the ‘theatre belt.’ Its seating capacity is 700 and the scale of prices now runs from fifty cents to two dollars” (Mackay 34). There is conflicting opinion, from commentators of the time, as to whether they upheld the integrity of their troupe ideals through this period. With the Players’ success, came an increase in staff and playhouse rental. This caused a rise in the ticket price to $1 from 50 cents. This increase in price was in contradiction with their manifesto. “Thus does ‘democracy’ fly out of the window when expenses come in at the door! The payment to the actors, and even the acquisition of a few trained players like Frank Conroy, didn’t appear greatly to improve the standard of acting which remained decidedly amateur” (W. P. Eaton 24). Others presented the opposite view; “The Washington Square Players may have changed their prices; but they have not changed their ideals. They still choose their plays to suit themselves; not to suit the public” (Mackay 34). This stands as a testament to the Players’ commitment to their ideals.
The Washington Square Players became known for their unique productions. The audience was never sure what to expect and would wait in anticipation for the initial reveal. “From the first it became apparent that the Washington Square Players had a flair for the unusual in the content and inscenation of their plays... -- indeed in their gift for making programs the Washington Square Players are, with few exceptions, masters of effect. The plays in their repertory are always in strong contrast and have literary or historic value” (Mackay 30).

Some of the critics were more tentative in their reviews even as the Players booked continuous seasons. “From obscure beginnings the Washington Square Players have developed into a company which, in its pleasant home at the Comedy Theatre, is commanding serious attention. From the outset this organization in its search for plays, whether American or foreign, attempted to promote a drama of ideas. Some of the selections, it must be confessed, were exotic rather than thoughtful. But the policy did succeed in conveying the impression that drama was taken seriously...” (F. 522). These cautiously positive reviews may have helped to fill the seats. Audiences wanted to see the cause of all the commentary. One aspect of the production the critics consistently gave rave reviews were the effects of the dynamic set designs. Their set designers took the craft seriously and the critics of the time recognized their effort. “In scenic investiture several of the Little Theatres of the United States are rapidly approaching the European standard, notably the Washington Square Players” (Mackay 19).

That is not to say that all the commentary was positive. When the Players attempted a full-length play, the reaction was harsh and immediate. “Like all children, they longed to grow up. Even in their infancy, they attempted to produce one of the most difficult of the modern plays, Chekov’s ‘The Seagull.’ It was a disastrous failure, and taught us the lesson that we could not
run before we could walk” (W. P. Eaton 209). However, even upon reflection of this bomb one of the critics, writing of the Players impact on theatre in 1929, put a positive spin on the experience. “The important thing is, not that they failed at their first attempt at a four-act play but, that they have succeeded by many happy productions of one-act plays in persuading the public to come see them in the longer work-in short, that they are now an accepted institution in New York, and are going on to wider effort” (W. P. Eaton). The one aspect of theatre the majority of the critics agreed upon was the weakness of the acting. According to W.P.Eaton, a theatre critic during the Players tenure, “On the whole, the acting was amateur. But the plays themselves were all vital, full of meaning, or full of racy fun, and the settings were unusual and arresting. The critics went away delighted” (W. P. Eaton). Not everyone was as supportive in their analysis. “A critic, writing at the time said, ‘Ultimately, no experimental theatre can succeed until it develops a company of players who can act. Enthusiasm, clever plays, picturesque and novel scenery, will never be a permanent substitute for acting” (W. P. Eaton 25). The Players did not find these reviews daunting and continued their quest to produce significant theatre. Perhaps they found solace in the remarks of another critic who stated, “With every production the acting of the Players improved. They had something to say whether they said it awkwardly or not, and ideas eventually overcome awkwardness” (Mackay 33).

The consistent focus on the Players acting may have led to the development of an acting school. One journalist commented the following, “At present writing [1917] the Washington Square Players have the only theatre in this country which has a school in connection with its work. Its pupils, as they advance in proficiency, are given small parts in the company. They are, moreover, able to observe the evolving of a play from the time the manuscript is accepted
through the stages of its scene designing, rehearsing, and costuming to its final production” (Mackay 37). Once again, this expansion to include a school did was noticed by the critics, “The accomplishment of the Washington Square Players in three years is little less than miraculous. From their start in the back room of a bookshop they have marched forward till now they have not only a theatre but a school of acting” (Mackay 37). Not everyone agreed that the Players were focusing on teaching, but rather that they were recruiting naturally gifted artists. “The earlier Players group had served its purpose; it had acted as an incubator for several talents in the theatre. These talents were not teaching talents; if they had been, the Players might still be in existence, turning amateur actors into professional actors, and so forth. They were producing talents…” (W. P. Eaton 216-217). The Players embraced their amateur status, which was part of the appeal for artists with new ideas who submitted their concepts. “It was a splendid training ground for writers, actors, producers and scenic artists, for its efforts were made on a scale which enabled the beginner to sustain his particular work” (W. P. Eaton 208-209). Playwrights in particular took advantage of this opportunity. The Players “… give incipient Dunsanys and Maeterlincks a chance to experiment, to get a hearing, a thing they never had before. Some compellingly interesting one-act plays by native authors have been the result, plays showing different facets of American life, interpreted both in terms of comedy and tragedy” (Mackay 19). There is agreement that the Players provided a performance venue for those artists that would not have had their work seen on Broadway at the time. The Players were able to take risks, artistically, financially, socially, that commercial theatre was unwilling or unable to take and introduced the public to a new type of theatre (W. P. Eaton 216).
Regardless of whether each production received a glowing review, the Players' toiled on. “Part of the success of the Washington Square Players is due to the fact that they all pull together; every one works his or her best for the good of the whole. Gradually, out of this team work, it became apparent that individual work would arise” (Mackay 33). They looked to their manifesto and kept their artistic integrity. Broadway felt the influence of their presence. The Players “…had a lasting impact on commercial theatre against which they were a reaction. Their very success in attracting audiences to out-of-the-way locations and out-of-the-ordinary productions frankly frightened the Broadway Producers. Eventually, however, it encouraged the commercial theatre to present daring significant material. American theatre before World War I was principally a place of entertainment, while the Washington Square Players and it’s like were places of dramatized ideas” (Kramer 153). Even as early as 1929, historians were crediting the Washington Square players with the leap in development of American theatre. “Nevertheless, more and more people everywhere are beginning to see a light. More and more people are beginning to realize that the allied arts of the theatre can, and ought to be, a field for wholesome self-expression, not merely for exploitation by Broadway shopkeepers. More and more people are realizing that each community has a right to its own theatre, its own dramatic idiom, and that the only way the community can ever achieve its own theatre is to set out to develop it from the bottom, by its own efforts. More and more people are beginning to realize a truth some of us have been reiterating for years—that the future development of the American theatre must come through renaissance in the practical theatre itself of the amateur spirit, brought into the theatre by amateurs who, with proper and intelligent leadership, will
remain to become self-respecting professional artists, or else by the existing professionals themselves breaking away from the present chains of exploitation” (W. P. Eaton).

That the Washington Square Players had a direct impact on the Theatre Guild is indisputable. The Theatre Guild would not be in existence if not for the Players. One researcher went as far as to say, “...it was in the work of the Washington Square Players that the germ of many ideas now forming a basic part of the Guild policy were developed” (W. P. Eaton 208). Many participants of the Guild began their artistic journey with Players. “At first glance it seems clear that the work of the earlier Washington Square Players, in developing new talent, was of considerably greater importance than the work of the Guild in utilizing talent already in existence. Indeed, since it was the Players which developed, in the main, the young talents of the Theatre Guild group, it is obvious that, without the earlier work of the Players, the Guild could not have existed at all...” (W. P. Eaton 216). These familiarities with the Players’ format help to lay the foundations of the Theatre Guild. The Theatre Guild credits the Washington Square Players with much of the methodology, both organizationally and artistically. “...the Players contributed at least two extremely valuable organization methods, and an extremely valuable artistic method, all of which were later to be of great importance to the Guild. It inaugurated the operation of a theatre under the direction of a Board of Managers, which performed the general function of controlling the artistic and financial policies of the theatre, the work of the Board not only including the selection of the plays but also the selection of the theatre, the actors, the director, and the scenic artist to be employed in each production, so that the direction of the organization was centered entirely in the Board, while the various executives designated by the Board carried out the policies agreed upon” (W. P. Eaton 211).
The Board has the ultimate power of the Guild. The Guild looked to the Players when determining how to fund their undertakings. “Another organization method which the Guild inherited from the Washington Square Players was that of securing a membership audience, the members of which subscribe in advance for a series of plays, their subscriptions furnishing the organization with some of the funds necessary to produce plays” (W. P. Eaton 212). The Guild has been able to grow and adjust through the years and is still in existence today.

The Washington Square Players ended in 1918. There is some controversy over the cause. Some commentators felt it was the move from The Band Box to The Comedy that initiated the demise. That the direct competition with Broadway was too much for this league of amateurs; “But by coming to Broadway, they inevitably entered into competition with it; they lost much of the amateur atmosphere, the joyous playboy spirit, which had charmed people at the Band Box, and they had nothing to meet the competition with but one-act plays” (W. P. Eaton 26). Others attributed the end to World War I, which pulled workers away from civilian life and into the military. One critic attributed this loss of labor and public interest to the difficulty the Players experienced with a George Bernard Shaw piece. “Indeed, the experiment at the Comedy was no longer a success financially; quite the reverse. The World War, in which America was now actively participating, was taking its toll of the Players, and public interest centered on more dramatic matters than plays, short or long. The last bill was staged on May 13, 1918, suggestively including Susan Glaspell’s ‘Close the Book,’ and shortly thereafter the company disbanded” (W. P. Eaton 28). During the years of the war and shortly following, the reviewers turned on the Players. When recalling their efforts critics would reference their lack of experience and training rather than the experimentation and innovations that they brought
to the theatre. This caused one critic for The Nation in 1919 to rebuke the naysayers, “It is the fashion at the moment to decry the Washington Square Players, to remember their amateurishness, their occasional errors in taste, and to forget the significance of their achievement—a clear case of the evil that men do living after them, the good being interred with their bones...the Washington Square Players represent the furthest advance of the insurgent theatre in America...They laid siege to the most sophisticated and jaded public in America, and they conquered far more ground than is generally admitted” (H.) Another supporter of the Players was moved to write in their defense, certain that the movement would continue, “…the dramatic critic in one of the New York papers, commenting on the failure of the Washington Square Players, made some slurring remarks, which caused me to write a letter to him in the month of June, 1918, from which I quote the following: ‘The Washington Square Players are no more dead than any other organization that is marking time on account of the War. The dramatic impulse which created it and kindred organizations is a living, breathing, real thing, much more alive than those who sneer at us.’ The doctors and wiseacres of Broadway and the newspaper offices who are busy analyzing the causes of the ‘death’ of the Washington Square Players, must not be surprised if the corpse expresses its appreciation by registering a vigorous kick.” (W. P. Eaton 212-213).

And live on they certainly have. The Washington Square Players gave rise to not only the Theatre Guild but also many other Little Theatres throughout the country. Their success caused the powers of Broadway to examine their choices. “This explosion began what today is the Off- and Off-Off-Broadway theatre in New York. Across the country, it gave impetus, inspiration—and material—to the newborn ‘little theatres’ which were supplanting the old stock companies
of the 1890s and the unsatisfying touring companies controlled by the Shubert Brothers and the Theatrical Syndicate” (Kramer 153). The Players forced the established theatre to have a conversation regarding the development of art in theatre. The risks the Players took were noticed. “An editor of Theatre Arts magazine remarked that, ‘Their greatest service...lies in their proving that even New York has an audience for what is too fresh and sincere for the jaded commercial producer to recognize and too strange to Broadway custom to find a way through other stage-doors” (Kramer 158). In 1929 W. P. Eaton was espousing the Players attributes when he stated, “...the Washington Square Players and their experiment...illustrates better than any other experiment yet tried in the American theatre the vitalizing influence of the amateur spirit, and points the way toward possible provincial theatres in various sections of the land, conducted not from Broadway but by local artists, and democratically serving the local community” (W. P. Eaton). The Players brought the artist back to Broadway and beyond, into the local community. “A noted critic has recently observed that he could tell whether the art life of a city was an affection or a reality by inquiring whether it supported a Little Theatre. It was like feeling the art pulse of the community” (Mackay 22). The existence of local, community theatres and cultural centers throughout the country is proof that the Washington Square Players live on.
Mortimer J. Adler and the Paideia Group

On June 28, 2001, Mortimer J. Adler, philosopher, educator, academic, reformer and nonconformist, left this world at the age of ninety-eight. Adler, as an editor of the Encyclopedia Britannica and composer of the Great Books, is easy to categorize as a dreary academic elitist. This however would be far from the truth; Adler was a rebel, bucking the educational system from his early years in school. He found the experience dull and unrewarding. “Only one teacher held my attention during my first year there [De Witt Clinton High School] – Garibaldi M. Lapolla, who taught freshman composition. Perceiving my fledging aspirations to become a writer, he volunteered to help me learn how to write. He told me how Flaubert had trained Maupassant by making him write the same story over and over again until, in Flaubert’s judgment, it was stylistically perfect. He proposed that we try the same procedure. My task was to write a single-page description of any object I felt worthy of the effort; he would blue-pencil it; I would do it over and over until Maestro said, “Well done.” I chose a fire hydrant as the object to describe, and describe it I did, at least twenty times before Mr. Lapolla laid his blue pencil down” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 2). This early experience foreshadowed much of his career to come. The ability to determine if a work is relevant, significant for exploration helped to format many of his publications in the future. The practice of writing a piece repeatedly helped to spark an interest in journalism. “While still at PS 186, I had entered an essay competition sponsored by the New York Sun for students in the city schools...But when it came to getting a job as a copyboy on the New York Sun, the silver medal, which I exhibited to the personnel manager of the newspaper, had the charm of gold. I got the job, and it was better than I might have hoped for, because it was not in the City Room where my hours would have
been four to midnight, but in the editorial rooms on the daytime shift” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 3). Adler then decided to leave school and focus on his journalism career. He felt he was more than qualified for a position on a paper since he had been editor in chief for the high school paper. This stance is one of the reasons he left school. He spent all of his time and resources working on the school paper rather than attending to his other classes. He also exhibited a bit of his arrogance when dealing with an issue between the principal and one of his reporters. The reporter in question had broken some rules of the school, the student’s grades had dropped below acceptable level for participation in extra-curricular activity, and the principal wanted him removed from the paper. Adler felt the integrity of the paper was paramount to any minor infraction and that he, Adler, as editor in chief, decided who would be retained or dismissed (Adler, Philosopher At Large 3). Adler lost the battle and decided that it was time he and the educational institution should part ways. Resources differ as to his age at the time; he was either 14 or 15. Nevertheless, what is certain is that he did not complete his high school education and did not receive a diploma marking graduation.

Adler’s duties at the New York Sun were not as glamorous as he desired or felt he deserved. He had been in charge, now he was the errand boy. “Taking handwritten copy from the desks of the editors and sending it by rope-controlled dumbwaiter down to the composing room, and then, when the bell rang, taking galley proofs from the dumbwaiter to the desk of the editor in chief, Edward Page Mitchell, hardly satisfied my desire to become a big-time journalist. After all, I had been editor in chief of my own newspaper at De Witt Clinton. Since my copy-running duties did not consume much time, I filled my idle hours by writing an editorial each day and boldly laying it on Mr. Mitchell’s desk, as I did those written by the three
editorial page writers. For some strange and lucky reason, my desk in the outer office had the only typewriter in the editorial department; so Mr. Mitchell did not have to decipher my scrawl” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 3). Once again, Adler fell into the habit of writing daily. Adler was ever confident in his abilities and was sure that Mitchell would recognize his talent. Adler was encouraged to continue this practice because he employed a simple check system; “Each night, after he [Mitchell] went home, I rummaged in his wastebasket to see if he had deposited my contribution there, but no typescript of mine was in the basket, either crumpled or torn up. Much later, I discovered all of them banded together in a bottom drawer of his desk, but at the time, I could not imagine what became of them. I therefore kept on persistently, since I felt that my whole future was at stake. On about the twenty-fifth day, the heavens opened up and the highroad to success was bathed in sunlight. There on the edge of Mr. Mitchell’s desk lay an editorial of mine, copy-edited and initialed by Mr. Mitchell for typesetting. My hand trembled as I picked it up, my legs felt watery, yet instead of taking the easy way of sending the copy down to the composing room by dumbwaiter, I walked down the stairs cradling it in my hands all the way” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 4). This marked a change in Adler’s position at the paper. He went from mere transporter to the assistant of Mr. Mitchell. This was an increase in status as well as duties. “Having discovered that I could typewrite and that I had read proof on my high school newspaper, he [Mr. Mitchell] moved me from the outer office to the inner office as his secretary, in which post I typed the letters he wrote out in longhand, read the galley proofs for the editorial page, and did other odd jobs...” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 4). Once again, Adler kept pushing the envelope. He was not satisfied simply copying others work from long hand to typed copy; he hungered to write for himself. “Not content with performing
these secretarial duties, I undertook to write verse for the editorial page, and also the little paragraphs that filled up the third column when the last of the editorials fell short of the bottom of the page” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 4).

This promotion led to Adler taking classes at Columbia University. He wanted to improve his writing abilities. “I decided to accelerate my advancement by attending night classes in the Extension Division of Columbia University—not because I wanted to remedy my deficiencies in schooling, but solely to improve the tools of my trade as a writer. I chose a course given by Prof. Frank Allen Patterson in Victorian literature, and that was the start of my undoing as a journalist” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 5). These classes triggered an interest that would last a lifetime. “One can see in the ambitions of the teenage Adler the Americanization of education. Knowledge was sought mainly as an instrument to move up the ladder of American society rather than as an end in itself. Yet as Adler entered Columbia College the idea of liberal education gradually took hold of his mind, pushing out more pragmatic considerations” (McInerny 15). Adler speaks to this concept directly in the following quote from his autobiography. “After being out of school, I looked forward with eager anticipation to serious study at college. I wanted to go to college for the only reason which, in my judgment, justifies embarking on that venture—to study just for the sake of learning and for no utilitarian or adventurous purpose to which learning might be put to use” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 6).

During Adler’s initial foray into college, he struggled with the direction to focus his studies. Journalism soon fell to the wayside as philosophy and poetry filled his thoughts. One of his early professors, Professor Patterson taught literature of the Romantic period. “He countered my fledgling aspirations to become a philosopher by encouraging me to write poetry” (Adler,
Philosopher At Large 11). Professor Patterson even challenged Adler’s decision to attend college. “He had the feeling he said, that I might turn out to be a better poet if I didn’t go to college” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 12). Adler wrestled with the issue of philosophy versus poetry throughout his college career. “I can remember another longish piece of verse that I wrote, during my junior year, in the style of Browning’s dramatic monologues, in which I had Skelton, a little known pre-Elizabethan poet, soliloquize about the comparative merits of being a poet and a philosopher, with the issue left unresolved” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 12). Ultimately, the innate philosopher won out.

Adler was the type of student who continually questioned his professors. He questioned everything: class format, content, ideas, themes, etc. While in Professor Irwin Edman’s course on Idealism Adler was asked to leave due to his propensity to interjecting his opinions into the lesson. The professor’s instructional style was teacher-based, a lecture format which did not allow time for student questions. “‘Mortimer,’ he said in a tone as solicitous of my welfare as he could manage, ‘I suggest that you take the afternoon off and do something else. You get much too excited in class, and the strain on your nerves is not good for you.’ I did as suggested and followed a similar course on many occasions thereafter. I must have cut a great many classes, for I cannot remember Edman’s lectures on Josiah Royce, but I did read The World and the Individual on my own in order to pass the final examination and get a grade for that course” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 27). This experience planted the seeds for what would become the Paideia Proposal. Adler was not asked to leave all of his classes; there is evidence that the format of the class could entice Adler the student. A lecture-based course that Adler enjoyed was a history of philosophy course given by F.J.E. Woodbridge. “Woodbridge’s lectures on
Aristotle filled many hours toward the end of the first semester. After spending some time on the pre-Socratic philosophers, he dwelt lovingly and at length on the dialogues of Plato, interpreting them not merely as philosophical discourses but as skillfully dramatized intellectual comedies…” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 29). Another experience that led to publications later in Adler’s life occurred with his first arrival into the University’s Library. “During my first year at Columbia, the exploration of the library opened my eyes and stretched my mind in ways not achievable by ordinary classroom instruction.” In awe of the expanse of literary volumes, Adler began to make a list of the titles he felt he needed to “become acquainted with…” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 23). It was fitting that Adler had this love of books and was attending Columbia at the time he did. His first year of school coincided with the first offering of the General and Honors program. The General Honors portion consisted of reading what John Erskine, English Professor, termed “‘the classics of Western civilization’—Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides down to Darwin, Marx and Freud—a book a week, for approximately sixty weeks of term time during the junior and senior years. It also involved one two hour evening seminar each week on the book assigned…The first offering of the General Honors course was scheduled for the fall semester of 1921, and since I would be a member of the junior class at that time, I applied for admission, was accepted and enrolled” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 30). This is an exceptional point of interest considering Adler lacked a high school diploma. Adler attributes his participation in this course with laying the foundations for his educational philosophy. “…I would give top place to the good luck of having John Erskine as my preceptor in General Honors…the impact on my mind of the books read in General Honors, and of Erskine’s method of conducting the discussion of them, was momentous. That one course…was a college
in itself—the whole of a liberal education or certainly the core of it. Not just the books we read, though each one was an eye opener, but the discussions which Erskine conducted... and still further, the discussions that the students themselves had with one another in between times, both about the books being read and about matters touched on in the seminars...” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 30-31).

Adler continued with the tradition of nonconformity; he progressed through senior year only to find that he could not graduate. It seems Adler chose to overlook the physical education requirement and never took his swimming test. Adler could not swim and chose to avoid the issue entirely. Once again, this discrepancy did not affect his career path. “Degree or no degree, he was appointed an instructor in psychology in 1923 and five years later earned a Ph.D. with a dissertation on the measurement of music appreciation” (Grimes). Adler paired with Mark Van Doren, to implement the General Honors program in 1923. The two became lifelong friends and complemented each other in their tutelage of the program. “We both adopted Erskine’s policy of proceeding like debonair amateurs, assured that even if the book under consideration was difficult for one of us, we at least should be able to read it better than our students and, in light of that better reading ask good questions to sustain a two-hour session” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 56-57). Being a part of the Honors Program kept Adler inspired. Although hired as a psychology instructor, his real passion was philosophy. He continued to lecture and write on the subject much to the chagrin of his peers. “In the annals of official academic philosophy, Adler doesn’t exist. Perhaps this is not surprising. Throughout his long life, he was an unmuted rebuke to the educational establishment” (McInerny 15). Commentators outside of the academic walls also voiced opinion concerning Adler’s contribution in the field of philosophy.
“Time dubbed Adler a Peeping Thomist. The editors were fascinated by a man whose philosophical career flourished outside the usual academic setting” (McInerny 15). Adler was ultimately successful in achieving a position within the philosophical arena. He had moved from Columbia to teach at the University of Chicago. What followed was an opportunity he could not ignore. “When I left the University of Chicago in 1952 to establish the Institute for Philosophical Research, my resolution was to devote a major portion of my energies to writing philosophical books, along with the work on the great books and the ideas that I was doing for Britannica. It was not until the 1980s that I came down from the ivory tower onto the streets to confront educational institutions and their personnel in order to promote the Paideia Project for a radical reform of basic schooling in the United States” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 62).

These years of teaching and his own educational journey shaped Adler’s views on education. Adler could be quite controversial with his statements. “No one can become an educated person in school, even in the best of schools or with the most complete schooling” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 10). The point Adler was trying to make when he espoused this opinion was that school as an institution compliments learning. The learning is an action a person must engage in as an individual and not confined to the four walls of a school building. The school provides a place for the individual to hone the skills of learning, “...skills of learning—the ability to read and write, speak and listen, observe, measure and calculate” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 10). The field of teaching was being viewed in reverse, according to Adler. He advocated a student centered educational model as opposed to a teacher-centered model. “Teaching is totally misconceived when the teacher is thought of as the primary or
principal cause of the learning that occurs in students” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 87). He went on to say, “I [Adler] have summarized this basic point by saying that no one learns anything from teachers, but only by mental activity with or without the help of teachers” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 74). Adler ruffled feathers further by stating that American teachers were not being educated in a manner that would support a student-centered model. “There is not a teachers college in the United States in which the preparation of teachers is controlled by the understanding that teaching, like farming and healing is a cooperative art, not a productive art like carpentry or cooking” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 87).

In order to achieve the changes Adler proposed, a re-examination of the precepts of education was required. “To get better educational programs in our schools, we must think in terms other than the present conception of a curriculum. That word stands for ‘subject—matter courses, didactically taught, with some courses required and some elective.’ All quick-fix educational reforms are curricular reforms; they recommend that certain courses be required, and others dropped; or they propose a ‘core curriculum’ of the most important courses to be taken—by some seldom by all” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 96). Adler adopted a perspective of looking more at methodology, the manner in which teaching occurs. He believed strongly in the Socratic Method, a stance that did not waiver throughout his career. What Adler proposed was an entire overhaul of the educational institution. Adler felt that learning was a lifelong activity that was not perfected until much later in life. Since a full appreciation of education could not be achieved until, a person had reached maturity Adler felt, school should focus on how to think rather than what to think. “That basic schooling should be
the same in its general direction, aiming to make all the children competent as learners, with the hope that they will become learned after they leave school, aiming to acquaint them superficially with the world of learning, and aiming to motivate them to go on learning for the rest of their lives” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 9). When Adler spoke to a person’s maturity, he meant that the individual had reached middle age. “At its best, schooling should be preparation for becoming a generally educated human being in the course of adult learning after all schooling is left behind, a goal to be achieved after one has reached fifty or more” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 86-87). If education was truly to produce life-long learners who could analyze critically the ever-changing modern world than the foundations of education within the institutions of learning need to be examined. The criteria of what would constitute an education program could not be based on concepts or ideas that would fluctuate in time. Again this where Adler is controversial; “The fundamental ideas and concepts upon which education should be based are not merely the mores and beliefs which happened to be current in 20th century America,’ he [Adler] once wrote. ‘They are universal truths about what constitutes a good education for all men at all times and places simply because they are men”’ (Grimes). This is an example of Adler’s philosophical slant to educational theory. “He [Adler] maintained that only truth should guide education. Neither the whims of educators, nor the changing policies of the state, could provide bedrock for young minds, only ‘the unchanging precepts of truth”’ (Hunter).

In order to achieve this institution of learning based on universal truths, Adler also attacked the structure of the school system. He felt strongly that schooling should begin at the age of three. Placing the emphasis on learning strategies rather than content, the age of three,
ripe with curiosity... The student would continue in organized education until 16 years of age.

Those years is preparation for living a decent human life and more abilities. This, for all, not just for those who go to college, requires preparation for continued learn throughout one’s adult life” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 87). Adler felt strongly that individuals should take two years after graduating, at age sixteen, to experience the world. “That, however, is only the beginning of education...no one should be allowed to continue in school immediately after basic schooling has been completed at the age of sixteen. There should be a hiatus of at least two years—I would prefer four—during which time the young become mature by engaging in the world’s work, either in the public or private sector of the economy” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 10). Experiences and exposures during youth become part of decision making in adulthood. It is human nature to build learning on a base of knowledge. Exposure and experience create knowledge. “When, in a lecture at the University of Denver in 1972, I first advocated two or four years of compulsory nonattendance at school as a break before going on to university, I could not resist the temptation of referring to my years of work on the Sun, as if my thesis had grown out of that experience. It could have been cited as a slight bit of evidence in support of the thesis, but hardly more than that. The idea of interrupted schooling was born out of thinking about student turmoil in the sixties. It was conceived in the context of other educational ideas which may have had some roots in my own experiences as a student and teacher; but these related ideas did not coalesce into a coherent educational theory until some years after I had retired from teaching” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 7).
This philosophical restructuring of education led to Adler’s two most radical proposals. First, that school eliminates electives. “Adler believes in liberal, non-specialized education without electives or vocational classes. For him, education should serve three purposes: to teach people how to use their leisure time well, to teach people to earn their living ethically, and to teach people to be responsible citizens in a democracy. He believes that each person has the innate ability to do these three things, and that education should above all prepare people to become lifelong learners” (Farrand). Adler was not opposed to the arts, fine, or manual; rather he felt that all students should be taking these courses at the same time. This would create an opportunity for a community dialogue resulting in intellectual discourse between students who shared a common language, that of their curriculum. When Adler made this proposal he was referencing his mentor Professor Erskine; “Erskine told his colleagues, the elective system had scattered the student body into a variety of courses and left few, if any, books that the whole student body had read and could talk to one another about. Lacking common intellectual themes, student conversation had degenerated into small talk. Erskine proposed General Honors as the needed corrective” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 31). Adler had a plan as to the structure of this system. “Philosophy and the arts are central to Adler’s educational vision. While he believes that every child should study math, science, history, geography, measurement, and other subjects in lower grades, his plan for upper secondary school and college centers on students gaining insight into works of fiction, poetry, drama, art and the like. This way, Adler believes students will gain an understanding of their own minds as well as the minds of others. Philosophy and art are for everyone, in his view. No one should be allowed to avoid them” (Farrand). The second proposal involved grading or assessment of
students. Adler felt the present system of assessing students undermined the learning process. The assessments provided data of how much content a student could retain rather than how their skills of learning, reading, writing, critical thinking, had developed. Content, then, alters the curriculum of school. “It is axiomatic that the way in which students are tested and graded determines what teachers teach and how they teach, what students study and how they study. Unless the present system of testing and grading is radically altered or totally abandoned, none of the desired objectives of sound educational reform can be accomplished” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 94). Adler believed in order for each student to be adequately assessed the assessment must be individualized. Students measured against their own growth rather than by the results of their peers. “Each student should be graded by an assessment of his or her accomplishment relative to his or her initial capacity for learning, never by reference to what others of greater capacity can be expected to accomplish” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 97). Adler further proposed abandoning numerical and letter systems. The question regarding grading then becomes what should take the place of the present letter or number system. “The answer is a narrative grade: a written statement by teachers concerning each individual child’s development as a learner. This should be done from first grade on, either once or twice a year; and it should be done in greater detail at the end of four years, eight years, and twelve years” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 97). In order to help keep the system uniform, Adler proposed this narrative described including three stipulations. “When grading is thus proportionate to individual capacity, there will be only three significant grades: fail, which means the student has not done what he or she is able to do; pass, which means that the child has done what he or she is able to do; and honors, which means the child
has exceeded reasonable expectations” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 98). This type of assessment was amenable to different types of learners. The individualization allows for those students who required modification for various physical, emotional, or social reasons to be assessed with the same system for the same courses as all students. “When comparative and competitive grading is replaced by individual and proportionate grading, it will no longer seem unreasonable and impractical to have the less able and more able students in exactly the same course of study” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 104). Adler was very aware of the obstacles that this unpopular proposal would attract. “…we know that any attempt to alter or abandon the present system of testing and grading would meet strong, if not intractable, opposition from professors of education, parents, personnel officers in corporations, and all those involved in administering the entrance requirements in our colleges. Overcoming this opposition will take well into the next century, if it can be done at all” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 95).

Adler’s strong educational views led to what the Paideia Proposal. In the late 1970’s America began to look at its educational institutions with concern. The thought was the youth of America had fallen behind their counterparts in other countries. The result would be a weaker work force, which would affect the nation’s economy. In his autobiography, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror, Adler states he read the government study A Nation at Risk and although he agreed with the findings, he did not agree with the results. I discovered this report was not available at that time. A number of reports and opinion papers generated by academic leaders indicated a growing concern and lack of confidence in the American school system. One report Adler may have been referring to was produced in 1977 by a panel consisting of
nineteen scholars and led Willard Wirtz. Wirtz had been Labor Secretary during the administrations of both Kennedy and Johnson. The findings of the report indicated that falling SAT scores were the result of cultural changes, specifically the increased use of television, and a decline in school quality. (Guthrie and Springer 16) During a lunch with Jacques Barzun, a colleague from Columbia University, Adler discussed these reports and their findings. “We agreed with its indictment of the failure of the schools and with its appraisal of the seriousness of the plight the United States faced in the future, if that failure were not remedied. But we dismissed as inadequate the measures proposed for correcting the situation. My reply was: let us form a small group of teachers and educators whom we know to be sufficiently like-minded about the need for drastic educational reform, and have them meet for the purpose of coming up with a better solution of the problem than the one outlined in A Nation at Risk” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 68). Adler saw this as an opportunity to champion the return of a true Liberal Arts education to institutions of learning; “Two things in particular are responsible for my own part in the generation of the Paideia Project. One was my experience of so many failures in trying to persuade colleges to introduce great books seminars and Socratic teaching, in order to reinstate a little bit of general education into their curriculums. I saw no possibility in the foreseeable future of getting the colleges to become the agencies of general, liberal education” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 66). Adler also believed he had the solution as to the structure of a proper program by referencing the successful program of learning instituted at St. John’s; “The other way in which the New Program at St. John’s College inspired the Paideia Project was its tripartite structure: great books seminars, coaching tutorials, and lectures—in descending order of importance. Here were the three kinds of
teaching that became central in the Paideia proposal” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 66). Adler’s experiences as a college professor was not his only qualification to speak to this discrepancy in education, he also had exposure to students and educators active in the public school system. Adler was asked to speak at various venues for educational leaders at the state, local and federal level to explain and defend his views. In the mid seventies Adler was asked to speak at the Aspen Executive Seminar. “Ruth B. Love, who was then the Superintendent of Schools in Oakland, California, happened to be in Aspen at the time. She audited that seminar and was so impressed by what she observed that she invited me to come to Oakland to conduct a similar seminar for seniors at the Skyline High School there” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 67). This connection had a powerful impact on the direction of Adler’s work. Adler had always taught at the college level for private schools. “That seminar was not only a memorable experience for me but, so far as I can remember, it was my first experience of teaching in public schools. I did not realize then what that experience foreboded for my becoming involved with educational reform at the level of basic schooling” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 67). He spoke with some colleagues and they decide to offer a counter proposal. This initial Paideia Group included the following members:

**Mortimer J. Adler** Chairman  
Director, Institute for Institute for Philosophical Research; Chairman, Board of Editors, Encyclopedia Britannica

**Otto Bird**, former head, General Program of Liberal Studies, University of Notre Dame

**Leon Botstein**, President Bard College; President, Simon’s Rock of Bard College

**Ernest L. Boyer**, President, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Washington, D.C.

**Nicholas L. Caputi**, Principal Skyline High School, Oakland, California

**Douglass Cater**, Senior Fellow, Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies
Donald Cowan, former President, University of Dallas; Fellow, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Cultures
Alonzo A. Crim, Superintendent, Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta Georgia
Clifton Fadiman, Author and critic
Dennis Gray, Deputy Director, Council for Basic Education, Washington, D.C.
Richard Hunt, Senior Lecturer and Director of the Andrew W. Mellon Faculty Fellowships Program, Harvard University
Ruth B. Love, General Superintendent of Schools, Chicago Board of Education
James Nelson, Director, Wye Institute, Inc., Queenstown, Maryland
James O’Toole, Professor of Management, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Southern California
Theodore T. Puck, President, and Director, Eleanor Roosevelt Institute for Cancer Research, Inc., Denver; Professor of Biochemistry, Biophysics, and Genetics, University of Colorado
Adolph W. Schmidt, former Chairman, Board of Visitors and Governors of St. John’s College, Annapolis and Santa Fe
Adele Simmons, President, Hampshire College
Theodore R. Sizer, Chairman, A Study of High Schools; former Headmaster, Phillips Academy--Andover
Charles Van Doren, Associate Director, Institute for Philosophical Research; Vice President/Editorial, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.
Geraldine Van Doren, Senior Fellow, Institute for Philosophical Research; Secretary, Paideia Project
John Van Doren, Senior Fellow, Institute for Philosophical Research; Executive Editor, The Great Ideas Today (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 69-70)

When Adler reflected on the roots of the Paideia Project in his second autobiography, he saw how far back the seeds were sown. In reviewing his earlier writings, he found his own experiences had become a blue print. “As I now look back at the essays I wrote in the four decades after the New Program was established at St. John’s College, I can discern how deep in my own past thinking were the roots of the Paideia Project when it first emerged in the late seventies” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 66). Adler also credits earlier academics with development of the Paideia Proposal; “John Dewey is a forerunner of Paideia. He said, over and over again, that all genuine learning is by doing, not by memorizing” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 74). This met some resistance from members of the group.
Adler argued effectively that Dewey had been misinterpreted. “In my judgment, what Dewey meant by *doing* includes every form of mental activity, whether or not it also involves action of some practical sort. What Dewey meant is that there is no genuine learning that does not actively engage the learner’s mind in thinking” (Adler, *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror* 74). Once he explained his rational for crediting Dewey with assisting in laying the groundwork the group acquiesced as be noted in the Proposal’s dedication. The group also included Horace Mann and Robert Hutchins in the dedication without any dissent. “In the middle of the last century Horace Mann had successfully fought for providing all the children of Massachusetts with at least six years of public schooling, and argued for this then radical step on the grounds that education was the indispensable factor in the movement toward establishing equality in this country and toward the realization of the democratic ideal in the post-bellum years. [Robert M.] Hutchins had pithily expressed one of the principles of Paideia in his statement that ‘the best education for the best is the best education for all’” (Adler, *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror* 71). Also included in the dedication is the definition of Paideia, a Greek word meaning the upbringing of child. How Paideia came to be the title of the group is uncertain, but the word has particular significance to Adler in relation to his work with Britannica; Paideia is also part of the word encyclopedia.

The members of this Paideia Group were highly dedicated to their professions and this project. According to Adler, “We met two or three times a year with occasional visits by persons who were not members of the group. In the course of those conferences, each lasting a day or two, three points became dominant in our thoughts about school reform. One was a commitment to democratizing the public schools of this country. This involved a genuine
understanding of equal educational opportunity, to which everyone paid lip service but which called for the same quality, not just the same quantity, of schooling for all children in attendance at our schools” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 70). This quality of education for all children was called into question during an interview Adler gave to O.L. Davis in 1982. Davis brought to the forefront the question of academic elitism. He challenged Adler by questioning the Program’s ability to find success with students who had obstacles to learning, cognitive, physical, emotional, or social. Adler countered by redefining the word remedial, “...Here remedial means individual attention, making up for deficiencies in teaching” (Davis 579). Davis had honed in on the second and third points the group covered during their conferences. The concept of learning needed to be defined. “A second controlling point in our discussions was our recognition of the three kinds of learning that should occur in the twelve years of compulsory schooling: (1) the acquisition of organized knowledge in a number of basic subjects, (2) the development of intellectual skills, all of them skills involved in the process of learning, and (3) the enlargement of the understanding of fundamental ideas and issues” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 70). As a student focused program the teacher would meet the student at their level and tailor the teaching to the student. The Proposal was very specific to how this teaching would occur. “The third point grew out of the second and merged with it; namely, the three kinds of teaching required for aiding and abetting the three kinds of learning: (1) didactic instruction or teaching by telling, (2) coaching or teaching by prescribing activities to be performed and practiced, and (3) the Socratic conduct of seminars, or teaching by questioning and by discussion” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 70).
The crux of the Paideia Proposal is that the reform involves methodology. “The basic terms of the Paideia reform are not curricular. Paideia is not concerned with courses at all, but with the three different kinds of teaching that must be present in every school and the three different kinds of learning that must go on there” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 96). These three types of teaching are referred to as a three-column structure in the Proposal. The columns are didactic, coaching and seminar. “In didactic teaching, declarative speech by the teacher predominates; in coaching, imperative speech; and in Socratic teaching, the interrogative. Memorization is a minor aspect in all three columns” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 88). The goal of all teaching is understanding of knowledge; memorization without understanding is meaningless. Understanding is achieved by combining the three types of teaching. “What is common to all three [teaching methods] is their embodiment of the principle that all genuine learning involves mental activity on the part of the learner. Memorization of what teachers tell their students in classroom lectures is not genuine learning at all, precisely because it does not engage the mind in mental activity. When the learning is active, not passive, the primary cause is the activity of the learner’s mind. Hence the teacher is at best a secondary and instrumental cause of the learning that takes place, working cooperatively with mental activity on the part of the learners” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 73). Adler describes the teacher as a coach; “The coach prescribes how students should perform in order to acquire these habits, tells them what to do and what not to do, supervises their practice of prescribed activity, and corrects errors in it. The habits thus formed are much more durable than verbal memories, which are highly volatile. Habits of skilled performance atrophy only if not exercised. That is why they are not as durable as
understanding, which, which once acquired, is never lost” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 88). When Adler referred to a deficiency in teaching, he was referring to a lack of training to act as a learning coach. The Proposal addressed this area as well. “Paideia proposed the following steps in the retraining of teachers. The principal of the school, together with its teachers, should be involved in seminars—in observing them and in conducting them, either seminars in which students are participants or seminars in which the teachers are themselves participants. In the course of this extended process, they must learn how to ask the second and third question and so on, questions they cannot prepare in advance because they are questions about the answer to the first question. Their advance preparation must consist of a very small number of leading questions, leaving to the seminar itself he asking of the follow-up questions based on the answers elicited to these leading questions” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 93). This act of coaching and seminar leadership is an art and a skill. The lesson planning must be open ended to allow the student to explore, build, and strengthen their understanding.

Davis continued hammering Adler by summing up the major obstacle facing the establishment of the Proposal; “One fact of American life, which your proposal will run up against, is the emphasis on learning to earn rather than learning to be fully educated persons” (Davis 580). Adler conceded the point, and in typical Adler fashion pointed out the error in that type of thinking. “That is probably the chief obstacle to this reform’s being widely accepted: parents who think that basic schooling is primarily or exclusively for learning how to make a living are making a mistake...In some sense, then, they will be initiated into the world of work without being given specialized training, which is never successful in our rapidly changing
society” (Davis 580). In order to clarify the Proposal’s structure Davis questioned how the Proposal would “introduce the world of work to everyone?” Adler summed up the Proposal simply, “...there would be at least eight years of basic manual training, sewing, cooking, for both boys and girls. It is as important to think with your hands as it is to think with your mind...It is important that we all make as much of ourselves as we can, fulfill our potentialities, realize our gifts, and lead as deeply human lives as we can lead” (Davis 580). Adler acknowledged all of the issues that Davis brought out. His opinion of education remained unchanged. “In view of individual differences in talent, aptitude, and temperament, the way in which the educational ideal is realized cannot be the same for everyone...However, if we conceive the educated person as any human being who, having acquired the tools of learning in school, goes on in the rest of life to use them for the fullest possible development of his or her capacities, then the ideal is realizable, at least to some degree, by every member of the population” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 9). Adler was convinced the Paideia Proposal met these challenges. This is not to say that the Paideia Group was harmoniously unanimous in creating the Proposal. “They were sufficiently like-minded about the general outline of what had to be done, but far from it about filling in the details” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 70). In order to reach an accord, Adler took a democratic approach. “[Adler] drew up a list of all the matters at issue and distributed it to those present, with the request that over the weekend each person should indicate the points with which he or she agreed and the points with which they disagreed” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 71). In this manner Adler achieved conciliation within the group; “…I would take the points agreed upon as the basis for writing a report to which they could all be willingly be signatories. The upshot of this procedure turned out to be
large enough measure of agreement for the purpose stated. I was, therefore, left with the task of writing a short book of seventy-nine pages, entitled *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto*” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 71).

Davis was not the only critic of the Proposal. Many of the academic leaders in country took issue with the Paideia Groups work. “...when it was first discussed by professors of education, [Paideia] was charged with being elitist. How could it be elitist and at the same time so completely committed to equal educational opportunity” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 85)? The group took to defending their Proposal with Adler leading the way once again. He wrote a second book entitled *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*. “It was provoked initially by a symposium...in which educators from various universities registered their misunderstanding of and their objections to the educational reform that had been proposed” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 78). As the *Paideia Proposal* gained reputation, academic leaders had specific questions regarding implementation in the classroom. In response, the Group reconvened and in 1984 produced *The Paideia Program an Educational Syllabus* (McInerny 16). This resource was for teachers, in order to support the application of Paideia Program in their schools. The group veered from their tradition of allowing Adler to produce the manuscript alone based on the conferences with their subsequent approval. For this manuscript, different members took on various topics in the form of multiple essays. The membership then reviewed and discussed the essays. Once again, the group found it difficult to agree on all points. Since the goal of the manuscript was “to be suggestive rather than prescriptive...we have not called attention to these minor differences, especially in view of the fact that we do not expect Paideia schools to be all alike in their adoption of the
recommendations made” (Adler, The Paideia Program An Educational Syllabus Essays by the Paideia Group xii).

One of the obstacles that continued to stymie Adler was how to answer the question regarding implementation of the changes called for in the Paideia reform. In 1987, Adler found he was able to formulate an answer. Adler found the answer in what he called the Wednesday Revolution. In order to explain this concept Adler described an experience he had leading seminars for a group of high school seniors. Seniors at Millbrook High School in Chapel Hill North Carolina participated in a five-session seminar series. In order to participate the students had to agree that they had not read any of the texts prior to the seminar. These sessions were videotaped. All of the participants, students, and teachers were pleased with the growth that occurred. “The seminars did more for the students than increase their understanding of basic ideas and issues. They clearly improved the students’ skills in reading, speaking, and listening. Most of all, they had an extraordinary effect on their ability to think critically, a skill that cannot be taught in itself or in a vacuum, but only in the context of discussions that involved reading, speaking, and listening” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 91). The students would continue the discussions among themselves on the bus as they rode back to school. The experience inspired Adler to develop the Wednesday Revolution. The Revolution consisted of three hours on Wednesdays, time captured from various points during the week. The three hours would be split in half, the first half for seminar, the second half spent coaching the students on essays each student had written in response to the questions, “How did your understanding of the text you read before the seminar change as a result of the seminar discussion? Did you understand the text better or differently? In what respects did your
understanding of it change” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 92)? These same questions would be addressed every week after the various seminars. The student would become increasingly adept at both participating in the seminar and developing their writing skills as they reflected critically on the seminar experience. This weekly experience would provide an inroad to further the progress toward the goals of Paideia.

The activities of the Paideia continued to be an essential part of Adler’s work throughout the 1980s. Much of this activity took place in Chicago. “...Ruth Love had set up a Paideia Coordinator to guide the reforms being instituted in the Chicago schools... The work started in 1984 and now, more than six years later, the evidence of its success is massive and clear. On days when great book seminars are scheduled, there is almost no absenteeism...Perhaps the best evidence of the effects of the changes introduced is something that happened two years ago” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 82). This was a positive example of the practical application of the Paideia Proposal. Students that had been educated through the Paideia system were voluntarily looking to continue the experience. In June of 1990, two of the original elementary schools participating in the Paideia Project would be graduating from sixth grade. These classes contained students taught in the Paideia manner since first grade. The students would be dispersed to high schools throughout the city of Chicago. The high schools did not offer great books seminars. “Dismayed by this, he proposed that we offer to conduct special Saturday morning seminars for them if they would volunteer to participate and their parents would support their willingness to attend them...The American National Bank called this its ‘Scholars Program.’ The voluntary enlistment in it by Goldblatt and New Sabin students exceeded half of the graduating class, and the program itself has been an
astonishing success...” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 82-83). Here was the proof that students, parents, and teachers believed in and would support the Paideia Proposal.

As pleased as Adler was with these events, he felt a change in leadership was needed. “In early 1988, the Paideia Council met in Chicago to discuss the decision I had reached about transferring the furtherance of the Paideia project from the Institute for Philosophical Research to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This decision had grown out of my failure, as head of the Institute, to raise major funds needed to plan a five- or even a three-year program of Paideia activities nationwide” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 105). Adler was close to ninety years old. He felt the Institute would not continue beyond his involvement. The University of North Carolina was adequately placed to be able to provide an unending foundation upon which the Group could build its fund raising efforts. Ever a democratic organization, the membership met and discussed the impact the change would have on the Paideia Project. To ensure this transition occurred as smoothly as possible the University projected how their institution could support Paideia Project. Adler himself had been revising the details concerning the three columns of Paideia as more schools had reported their data from implementation. It was decided that in order to preserve the integrity of the Project’s ideals the Manifesto needed to be revisited. This resulted in the Declaration of Paideia Principles. “This Declaration of Paideia Principles, signed by the members of what was then called the Paideia Council, was attached to the contractual agreement between the Institute for Philosophical Research and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 106). This marked the establishment of the National Center for the Paideia Program at Chapel Hill. “In his book A Place Called School [written in 1984], John
Goodlad, after a lengthy survey of this country’s schools reported that 85 percent of all classroom time in the United States is spent by teachers talking at students, with students listening or not, taking notes or not; and less than 15 percent of the time is spent in teachers talking with students, in which they actively respond to questions and engage in discussion. If these figures could be reversed, the main pedagogical aim of Paideia would be achieved” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 87). At present time there are over sixty-two schools formally affiliated with the National Paideia Center as members. The Center works with hundreds of schools providing training, research, and materials. Adler’s legacy, The Paideia Proposal, lives on.
Conclusions

The Progressive Era gave birth to both the Washington Square Players and Mortimer J. Adler, the chairman of the Paideia Group; outwardly opposing entities. The Players were considered an experimental theatre group; Alder, and consequently the Paideia group are considered conservative academics. As I researched Adler, I would be reminded of the Players and vice versa. Their similarities were so strong my first inclination was to look for a direct connection between Adler and the Players. The Washington Square Players were becoming an influence on theatre between 1914 and 1920. This was the time that Adler was dropping out of school to follow a path in journalism and began to work for the New York Sun. The Players actively sought publicity and their opening performance was a favorite playwright of Adler's, Lord Dunsany's Glittering Gate. Adler mentions frequenting the theatre while working. “What was left of my earnings each week I spent on gallery tickets for Broadway shows and on books I bought at Brentano’s—mainly plays by G.B. Shaw, Lord Dunsany, and John Galsworthy, my heroes at the time” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 4). As an assistant to the editor, Adler may have taken notice of pieces written about the Players and their impact on Broadway. I was unable to recover a review of the Players written for The Sun. Adler speaks to the possibility of being unwittingly influenced by exposure to events during his lifetime, “...I am astounded to discover how many of the ideas that I would otherwise have thought took hold of me in much later years had already seized my mind and taken shape in it” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 39). This theatrical exposure could be evidence by the peppering of his writings with theatrical terms. He describes his lectures as performances; he conducts discussions and referred to his collaboration with Mark Van Doren as if they were dancing partners (Adler, Philosopher At Large
I was unable to find a direct connection between The Players and Adler. What I did find were common structures or threads between them. The Washington Square Players and Mortimer J. Adler, the Chairman of the Paideia Group, were nonconformists grounded in democracy, who initiated reform amidst controversy.

When Adler wrote of the difference between learning and memorizing he was addressing the current practices of education, but he could have easily been referring to the Player's rebellion to Syndicate's formula of Broadway. Adler wrote, “The pain of learning can be eased or compensated by the joy of remembering what one has learned; therefore substituting rote memory for intellection—becoming satisfied with the mere memory of that which one does not fully understand—can be a great temptation” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 25). His frustration with the acceptance of superficial awareness as acquisition of knowledge is palpable. The Players had come to the same conclusion regarding theatre. Audiences were becoming satisfied with superficial entertainment, they had grown accustomed to being passive. Robert Edward Jones stated, “What was being offered on American stages...was not real theatre because it lacked ‘dramatic nourishment.’ ‘We are hungry,’ he cried, ‘and we are given a cook-book to eat instead of a meal. We expect to go on a journey, and we have to be satisfied with a map and a time table.’” (Kramer 155). The growth the Players achieved for American Theatre was painful at times, but the joy that achieved when they succeeded was immeasurable. “In the words of commercial producer Hopkins, all Broadway offered was a ‘ceaseless repetition of a familiar and timeworn formula’ that no longer provided any excitement to the audiences” (Kramer 154). The Players refused to kowtow to the conventions the business managers of Broadway set forth. The Players, in contrast, challenged the audience
by creating an artist-centered theater. This is not to indicate the Players were developing star vehicles; rather projects selected allowed for all artists involved to develop their craft from playwright to actor to set designer. “The New York Tribune summed up the reaction this way: ‘If the American stage is ever to extend its exhibitions beyond the ‘tired business man’ type of music show and the farces and melodramas which have been such money makers in the last couple of seasons, it will be by reason of the competition of such organizations as the Washington Square Players” (Kramer 168).

The reports of Adler’s performance as a student indicate he would be an active audience member; in fact, he would be greatly disappointed if the production did not to require him to think. While in Professor Irwin Edman’s course on Idealism Adler was asked to leave. The professor’s instructional style was teacher-based, a lecture format which did not allow time for student questions. Adler supports this supposition when he spoke of his strong reaction to the emotions theatre could evoke. He wrote in his paper ‘Love and Logic in Philosophy,’ “…the great depression that I suffered in witnessing Bernard Shaw’s metabiological Pentateuch (i.e. Back to Methuselah). Describing the play as ‘a dramatization of Bergsonism,’ whose theory of the élan vital underlying what Bergson called ‘creative evolution’ I thought sheer poppycock, I reacted violently against long speeches in which Shaw’s character’s discussed Bergson’s false doctrines in a manner that put them out of reach of argument. ‘I trembled when I heard the puppets describe the science of their day. I squirmed uncomfortably in my seat as I realized the supposed transiency of our knowledge and our world’—to be transcended by the coming race of supermen. ‘As I left the theatre, I comforted myself by the reflection that the play was only a great poem and Shaw a poet in his visions. Then, as never before, did I fully and clearly
appreciate the significance of Plato’s banishment of the poets from the republic!’” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 43). It is significant that the characters were puppets, an unconventional theatre device used for this performance, and yet the conservative Adler was in the audience and sufficiently moved that he found it necessary to comfort himself by grounding himself with Plato. That Adler became an active audience member is undeniable.

Both the Players and Adler’s persistent belief in their abilities drove them to find success without conforming to the traditional path. It is not surprising, given his unconventional rise through the academic ranks, that Adler would have detractors in equal number to supporters. “Dr. Adler’s popularizing efforts often invited scorn. One critic called him ‘the Charles Atlas of Western intellection,’ and the writer Nelson Algren dismissed him as ‘the Lawrence Welk of the philosophy trade.’ He was dismissed as a lightweight and something of a crank by many academic philosophers, a rebuff he claimed not to mind” (Grimes). Adler embraced this categorization as an amateur. He felt that it was appropriate to the theory of liberal education that educators should not specialize. In his opinion, “Most professionals teach by telling; amateurs, among whom Socrates was a paragon, teach by questioning...I remember shocking some members of the group by the contrast I drew between the orthodox, professional teacher who is loathe to move beyond the walled enclosure of his specialty and the Socratic amateur who is willing to sacrifice the competence of the specialist in order to achieve the competence of the generalist, even if his doing so causes his orthodox colleagues to charge him with incompetence” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 58). The Washington Square Players were also controversial in their amateur status. Some of the participants had no experience in theatre beyond that of audience member. The amateur status allowed the Players freedom to explore
outside the confines of the professional theatre. "The professionals also certainly looked down on the amateurs and their impecunious troupes—until the successes started to attract critical acclaim. Then the croakers and doubters clamored to join them” (Kramer 150). Long after the Players had stopped producing plays, the critiques were still discussing the effect of these amateurs. Specifically, these amateurs instigated a reform of the American Theatre. “They were for the most part amateurs, many of them graduates of that new university study of the theatre, all of them eager to have some hand in dramatic production and dissatisfied with the kind of dramatic production made in the commercial playhouse. It might be easy to exaggerate their interest in reform: doubtless, their desire to be doing something creative themselves chiefly moved them to action. But there is no doubt of their scorn for the flabby, purposeless, and false plays then more or less compelled by conditions in the theatre and their enthusiasm for what they considered a more honest art” (W. P. Eaton 19-20).

The Washington Square Players and Adler’s Paideia Group both initiated reform, one in theatre the other in education. Both saw the systems in which they were working as flawed. Both groups developed a set principles set forth in a manifesto that guided their decisions. For the Players the focus was the quality of the art and craft of theatre, “Intellectual and decorative drama, fresh outlook, and keen stimulus are thus put within the reach of those who hunger for them. It is one thing to read Shaw, and another to get the impact of his dialogue performed on the stage. It is one thing to hear of simplicity of line, of the beauty obtainable through sheer color, and another thing to see line and color work their miracle” (Mackay 20). The origin of the Players was educational, born from discussion or seminar of theatrical works. One of the core elements of Paideia’s three-column system is seminar forming another connection between
two groups. The Paideia group, similarly, sought to focus on the quality of the art and craft of education, “The Paideia reform, being dedicated to a one-track curriculum for all students, recognizes that given all equal educational opportunity, equal in quality as well as quantity, does not mean equality of results. Given the same opportunities for learning, students of unequal ability will be unequal in their accomplishments. But if each does as well as his or her capacity allows, each has acquitted himself or herself perfectly” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 97). As the Players first met with skepticism, Adler recognized that the academic community would greet the Paideia Proposal with little enthusiasm. “It is often true that ‘there is nothing more difficult to carry out, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain of success than to initiate a new order of things.’ A new order is what is called for. The Paideia Proposal provides public education in this country with both a challenge and an opportunity” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 78)!

The reforms of both parties were met with controversy. The Washington Square Players were introducing a new format to the theatrical arena of Broadway. In defiance of the accepted theatrical policy that audiences would only be attracted to a drama in four acts, the Players developed productions consisting of one-act plays. The Board of Managers vetted the selection of works. The Players voted on the selections determining as a group their productions. This was quite different from the business model adopted by the theatre owners of Broadway. In order to finance these endeavors, they sold subscriptions that include special performances, lectures, and more this was unheard of at the time. The Players encountered a reaction of cynicism to their reforms, yet achieved success during their tenure. The Players “...had a lasting impact on commercial theatre against which they were a reaction. Their very success in
attracting audiences to out-of-the-way locations and out-of-the-ordinary productions frankly frightened the Broadway Producers. Eventually, however, it encouraged the commercial theatre to present daring significant material. American theatre before World War I was principally a place of entertainment, while the Washington Square Players and it’s like were places of dramatized ideas” (Kramer 153). The measured success not by the number of seats sold but by the artist and audience reaction. The Paideia group also encountered external controversies. The *Paideia Proposal* was seen as elitist, that only a specific group of students would find success in the program. The Group anticipated this objection, “This will be misunderstood if we do not immediately add that, with children initially unequal in their aptitude for learning, giving them a truly equal educational opportunity will result in what appears to be an inequality of results. On the same track and from the same starting line with no handicaps, those who are initially unequal as runners will not go as far or as fast” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 84). The Group used a metaphor involving sponges to explain their stance. “But this inequality of results disappears when we measure the results proportionately by reference to differential capacity. Consider three sponges, one small, one large, and one intermediate in size. Immerse all three in containers in which the purity of the liquid is the same in all three, representing the same high quality of schooling for all. Each sponge will absorb as much of that liquid as it is capable of absorbing. The amounts will be arithmetically unequal, but the three sponges will be equally full. Each full to its capacity is equally full” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 84). In other words, children measured individually, based on their abilities. This led to another controversy linked to adopting the program. “The most serious obstacle to the adoption of the Paideia reform is the
way in which children have been and are still being graded in school, which is in terms of an arithmetic inequality of results. Unless we substitute a different method of grading, one that measures each child’s achievement by reference to that child’s capacity and not by reference to the achievement of other children, we cannot establish equal opportunity, so that all the sponges fill themselves to the brim with different amounts of rich cream” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 85). Just as the Players had to deal with the issue of funding, the Paideia Group found funding to be an ongoing impediment. “Since great foundations and charitable trusts of this country are inclined to grant money for proposed educational reforms only if the reforms promise a quick-fix that can be accomplished in the years immediately ahead, the fiscal support goes in large quantities to reform proposals that can promise superficial quick-fixes but do not touch the heart of what is wrong with our educational system” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 96). The Paideia Group was not as triumphant in their efforts to overcome this hindrance. When Adler stepped down as chair for the Group, he cited his inability to obtain long term funding as one of his failings.

In ‘initiating a new order’, both groups encountered internal controversies. The Players’ internal debate centered on the selection of works to produce; some of the members felt the Players were not highlighting enough American playwrights. This led to a splintering off of some members who formed the Provincetown Players. The Provincetown Players also felt the Washington Square Players had become too commercial in their efforts to compete with established Broadway theatres. “The Provincetown Players were frankly experimental when the Washington Square Players were attempting to produce plays which would be in healthy competition with the plays of Broadway. The Washington Square Players joined the issue of the
Art Theatre versus the Commercial Theatre; it sought to produce its plays at the Comedy Theatre in competition with commercial attractions; it sent a traveling company on tour; and it produced Ibsen’s ‘Ghosts,’ and Shaw’s ‘Mrs. Warren’s Profession’...” (W. P. Eaton 210). The Paideia Groups internal debates centered on Adler’s’ strongly held beliefs regarding the age a child schooling should take place and the infusion of a sabbatical prior to entry into college. Adler sums up two items in contention in this way: “One was concerned with early learning and with the advancement of kindergarten to age three, with the completion of the twelve years of basic schooling at age sixteen, not eighteen...I went so far as to suggest that the B.A. degree be given on graduation from high school, signifying the completion of the first stage of general education, and that undergraduate colleges become three-year institutions...The second point...I proposed that, in the next two years, there should be compulsory nonschooling. Those who were college-bound in high school would not go directly to college, but would grow up as a result of two years of work experience, either in the private or public sector of the economy. As a result, they would be better students in college, because they would be more mature; and they would have a better sense of what they wanted to do with their lives” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 81). This idea of instituting a hiatus from schooling did not arise solely from Adler’s own experiences. He also gave credit to the observations he had made during the “student turmoil of the sixties” (Adler, Philosopher At Large 7). The reason for the opposition was surprising in that it was not a philosophical dispute, but rather the concern lied in the ability to establish support outside of the Group.” My associates opposed these two recommendations, not because they disagreed with the underlying reasons for advancing them, but because they thought it would be imprudent to take on opposition from so many
quarters” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 81). In accordance with the Group
democratic manner, Adler conceded to the majority and removed those two points from the
proposal.

Democracy was a guiding precept for both associations; as evidenced by the ideals
included in their manifestos. The Players exhibited their democracy through their ticket price.
“... that the theatre was to be ‘democratic,’ with a 50-cent scale, and the inauguration of season
subscriptions...The ‘democratic’ purpose of the Washington Square Players was perhaps a
gesture, if unconsciously so...The experiment, however, was democratic in a much more
genuine sense. It was not superimposed from above by certain rich men. It rose spontaneously
from the desires of the actual workers for a chance at self-expression, and looked for audience
to men and women likeminded in discontent with the existing playhouse. Probably the desire
for self-expression was a bit stronger, too, than the discontent with existing conditions! It was
happy, carefree, youthful, and essentially amateur” (W. P. Eaton 20). The intent was to bring
the art to the people. This deliberate inclusion of a standard ticket price in their manifesto
cemented the Players dedication to their art not their financial success. “This theatre was
started for love of ideas, not for love of money. It struck a new and stimulating note to which
most of the New York critics instantly responded” (Mackay 30). They grounded their democracy
further through the work selection process. “It has put art into the hands of the people instead
of into the hands of the box office, and art that is of the people, that is native and authentic, is
a force to be reckoned with in all ages and all climes” (Mackay 21). The success of the Players
consequently became a detriment to their democracy. “Too many discerning folk who followed
the Washington Square Players from the very beginning this rise in price was a matter of
sorrow. It seemed to curtail the idea of democracy” (Mackay 34). This positive achievement brought into question whether the Players had become what they were reacting against. Their growth meant they had to meet larger fiscal demands. Some researchers believe that this need to compete with Broadway brought about their demise. Others feel it was the advent of World War I.

The democracy of the Paideia Group is embedded in history. Adler was fond of quoting John Amos Comenius, the author of The Great Didactic, written in 1657. “The education that I propose includes all that is proper for a man and it is one which all men who are born into this world should share….Our first wish is that all men be educated fully to full humanity, not any one individual, not a few, nor even many, but all men together and singly, young and old, rich and poor, of high and low birth, men and women—in a word all whose fate it is to be born human beings, so that at last the whole of the human race become educated, men of all ages, all conditions, both sexes, and all nations” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 80). The Group embraced these ideals and “…created the Paideia Project, which was intended to humanize and democratize the public schools by providing all students with a traditional humanist education, using Socratic Method. (Grimes). Adler frequently cites John Dewey as capturing the essence of Paideia in the opening of his work School and Society: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 72). Adler felt Professor Diane Ravitch’s explanation of Dewey’s precept best summarized the goals of Paideia, “The best and wisest parents…want their child to read and write fluently; to speak articulately; to listen carefully; to
learn to participate in the give-and-take of group discussions; to learn self-discipline and to
develop the capacity for deferred gratification; to read and appreciate good literature; to have
a strong knowledge of history, both of our own nation and of others; to appreciate the values
of a free, democratic society; to understand science, mathematics, technology, and the natural
world; to become engaged in the arts, both as a participant and as one capable of appreciating
aesthetic excellence...Such parents would also want a good program of physical education and
[also] even competence in a foreign language. Presumably, these mythical best and wisest
parents want their child to have some sense of possible occupation or profession, but it [is
highly doubtful] that they would want their child to use school time for vocational training...in
the pre-collegiate years” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 73).

The Paideia Group challenged the idea of democracy in education even further by
stating that modern schools were inherently undemocratic. “We are politically a classless
society. Our citizenry as a whole is our ruling class. We should, therefore, be an educationally
classless society” (Adler, The Paideia Proposal An Educational Manifesto 5). The Group used as
evidence the presence of track systems used in schools. This pattern of the have versus the
have-nots was embedding in the history of public school. “In 1817, Thomas Jefferson proposed
to the legislature of Virginia that it take the first small step toward public schooling in this
country. He proposed that Virginia give all children three years of common schooling at the
public expense. After three years, he added, let us divide the children into those destined for
labor and those destined for leisure and learning. Let us send those destined for labor into the
shops as apprentices or onto the fields as hired hands. Those destined for leisure and learning,
let us send to college, which they could finish by the age of twelve” (Adler, A Second Look in the
Rearview Mirror 85-86). The legislature voted down the proposal, not because of the obvious discrepancies that would create a class system but rather because it was determined by the assembly “that those destined for labor did not need three years of schooling to prepare them for work. They would learn what had to be done on the job itself. They were not going to be enfranchised citizens in any case, and so did not need the bare minimum of literacy required for that political status” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 86). The Paideia Group’s stance was that nothing had really changed since 1817. The country still divided its children, committing them to a predestined path in life. “More than a hundred and fifty years later, what we are doing is still elitist in the same way as Jefferson’s proposal. We do not talk about those destined for labor and those for leisure and learning. Instead, we divide them into the college-bound and those not planning to go to college, and after the first six or eight years of public schooling, we send some to vocational high schools and some to secondary schools supposed to be devoted to the liberal arts” (Adler, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror 86). The Paideia Proposal would abolish this system. The goal of education would be to prepare individuals to be responsible citizens; a citizen who had a “philosophical duty to think clearly and exercise free will wisely” (Grimes).

The Washington Square Players and Mortimer J. Adler’s Paideia Group were attempting radical democratic reform, arousing controversy with their nonconformity. Was Adler aware of the Washington Square Players efforts? This cannot be proven, though the Players made certain their efforts were not conducted in secret. They invited the newspapers of the time to cover their events. Adler grew up during this exciting era filled with initiatives. Adler had alluded to the influence of the events of his life; he admits his education theory was shaped to
an extent by what he witnessed of the youth of the sixties; whether this included events that occurred during his youth, again, cannot be proven. What can be stated is that there are common threads or connections that can be ascertained. Both parties challenged the American public to be attentive, active participants in society. In order to achieve this they both examined the framework of their fields; demanding quality in their respective fields. They chose to overcome the obstacles inherent to striving beyond mediocrity; the major obstacle being fear; fear of change, fear of learning, fear of growth. To achieve this quality they turned to the American public and asked can you hum?
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