



- » JAAACS Home
- » Article Archive
- » Editorial Statement
- » Call for Manuscripts
- » Author Guidelines
- » Editorial Board
- » Review Board

- » Submit An Article
- » Contact JAAACS

Learning From Caroline Pratt

Petra Munro Hendry
Louisiana State University

To understand the philosophy of the pragmatist philosopher Caroline Pratt (1867-1954) is a challenge I have struggled with for many years. Like pragmatism itself, Pratt's philosophy is elusive. This evasion is central to her intellectual thought. In reading her 1948 autobiography, *I Learn From Children: An Adventure in Progressive Education*, she reflects, "All my life I have fought against formula. Once you set down a formula, you are imprisoned by it...I would not be talked into marking out any blueprints for education, outside the school or in it. This refusal to formulate a 'system' made me a problem" (pg 58). Her commitment to keep ideas in "play" is what made her an exemplar of pragmatist thought. Ironically, her refusal to be imprisoned by any system, blueprint or formula has relegated her to the margins of pragmatist philosophy and progressive educational history.

However, this is no longer the case. Mary Hauser's *Learning from Children: The Life and Legacy of Caroline Pratt*, brings to life the philosophy of this radical teacher and thinker. This is made possible by Hauser's emphasis on correcting the "ahistorical nature of the profession of education" (Hauser, pg.10). For Hauser this means specifically historicizing Pratt's life from a radical, feminist perspective in which "using a gendered lens to understand Pratt's life and work recognizes and makes explicit the role of the sociocultural context of gender in constructing human knowledge" (Hauser, pg 11). Pratt's lived experiences as a woman were central to her pedagogical and philosophical beliefs regarding children. Rejecting the rigid gender norms of domesticity imposed on women, Pratt, like other women pragmatists, believed that women's experiences were central to shaping democracy. Pratt, took this belief one step further to include children. Hauser suggests that an important legacy of Pratt was her unwavering trust in children to learn from the building of community through play. Central to the City and Country School founded by Pratt in 1914 was that "Children were not told about democracy, they lived it and critiqued it" (Hauser, 2006: 142). Democracy was not something that could be taught, it had to be experienced. Pratt, unlike the social reconstructionists (Dewey, 1928; Counts, 1932), refused to use education as a form of political socialization in part because she saw democracy and political indoctrination as antithetical. Her refusal to be "imprisoned" by any system, including dominant gender norms and expectations as well as commonly understood "progressive" concepts have contributed to her exclusion as a pragmatist philosopher in progressive educational history. By historicizing Pratt's life, Hauser takes seriously her

gendered experience as central to her thought. This shift in analysis is central to “engendering” the traditional tale of progressive educational history (Munro, 1998).

The brilliance of Mary Hauser’s book is that she subverts the master narrative of progressivism by providing a counter narrative that reads Pratt’s life and philosophy from her subject position as a radical, socialist, pragmatist. By focusing on the historical, social, cultural context in which Pratt’s philosophy emerged, Hauser contends that Pratt was not merely a dutiful daughter, carrying out the ideas of John Dewey or other male progressives, but was a “radical” progressive whose unique ideas regarding education, social justice and democracy were influenced by progressivism, but not limited to it. Research on Pratt has focused on situating her within the progressive tradition (Cremin, 1962; Hirsch, 1986) or within the tradition of Victorian Womanhood (Carlton, 1986). Alternatively, Hauser examines the specific historical, social influences that shaped women’s pragmatist theorizing including those of feminism, socialism, the labor movement and women’s rights (Seigfried, 1996).

By disrupting traditional historical categories, Hauser’s biography of Caroline Pratt pushes the boundaries of historical thought regarding what is commonly termed the “progressive era.” Pratt does not fit neatly into either the dominant characterizations of progressivism as either-child-centered or -social reconstructionist. Her understandings of the central concepts of play, democracy and science chart out a unique feminist, pragmatist philosophy that was undoubtedly the consequence of her own lived experiences of gender. Throughout the remainder of this essay, I draw on Hauser’s book as well as Pratt’s own writings, to focus specifically on these three concepts of Pratt’s pragmatist philosophy:

- play as critical to democracy
- social change as the continual reconstruction of experience.
- science as the emancipatory potential of inquiry through the continual reconstruction of experience.

Play, Not Just Play

My own education was given me, not in teacher-training courses, not by professors of pedagogy, but by children themselves.

Caroline Pratt, 1948: 10

My first act of rebellion, then was to go to the Dean (at Teachers College) and announce that Kindergarten was not for me.

Caroline Pratt, 1948: 15

After teaching first grade for five years (1887-1892) in her hometown of Fayetteville, New York, Carolyn Pratt planned to become a “Kindergartner.” While this might seem a “natural” aspiration for a young middle class woman of the Victorian era, this was in some regards a “radical” idea. The idea of a “kindergarten” was relatively new and was predicated on the emergent concept of childhood as a unique and distinct period in life characterized by innocence and a view of children as essentially good. This modernist and Western construction of “childhood” had its roots in the Enlightenment thinkers, particularly Jean Rousseau and Johann Pestalozzi who rejected Reformation notions of the child as sinful and morally corrupt (Cannella, 1998). While children had basically been treated like small adults or ignored until they were adults, the 19th century constructions of childhood as “innocent” required pedagogies in which they could “grow,” “unfold” and “progress” and resulted in an ever increasing environment of public intervention, surveillance and

empirical study (Cannella, 1998). By the turn of the century two interrelated but conflicting discourses regarding early childhood emerged; the romantic, child-centered movement which was the expression of natural individualism and the child study movement of G. Stanley Hall which drew on scientific discourses to propose that children “naturally” evolved through stages of development. These multiple discourses were to have a profound impact on the emergence of the kindergarten movement and the work of Caroline Pratt.

The emergence of “childhood” as natural and requiring a unique education paralleled the emerging discourse of “teaching as women’s true profession” (Kaufman, 1984). In 1860, there was only one English speaking kindergarten, founded by Elizabeth Peabody in Boston (Margerethe Schurz had introduced the first kindergarten, German speaking). By 1880 there were 400 kindergartens (Vandewalker, 1908). At the turn of the century, women kindergartens (Susan Blow, Elizabeth Harrison, and Kate Wiggin) advocated that the kindergarten was essential to the development of children. Drawing on Friedrich Froebel’s (1782-1852) kindergarten philosophy, which saw play and activity as central to the growth and development of the individual, these early kindergarteners adopted the Froebelian “gifts” and had as their goal public kindergartens for all children. While the “kindergarten movement” provided a way in which women educators could enter the public sphere previously reserved for men, their work was shaped by complex and contradictory gendered and racialized discourses. As Walkerdine (1990) has suggested “Women teachers became caught, trapped inside a concept of nurturance which held them responsible for the freeing of each little individual, and therefore for the management of an idealist dream, an impossible fiction” (pg 19). The teacher’s primary role was passive, she was to “help” or “facilitate” the child release his or her inner self.

Consequently, the field of early childhood education, increasingly defined by male “experts,” was grounded not only in essentialist notions of the child as “innocent,” and thus requiring protection and effectively disempowering the child of agency, but also women teachers were essentialized as “naturally” suited to teaching children thereby reifying dominant gender norms that subjugated women. Thus, as Cannella (1998) maintains, “women” now “separate” and distinct from the “child” faced the contradiction of conflicting discourses whereby on the one hand they were “naturally” nurturant and passive facilitators while simultaneously advocating a pedagogy that was based in self-directed activity, exploration and active agency. Ultimately these discourses functioned to disempower both women and children. The subjugation of women and children within these particular discursive practices of early childhood education served to reproduce white, middle-class notions of “civilization” that were predicated on the superiority of the white male. The turn of the century “crisis of masculinity” (Bederman, 1995) brought on by the “threat” of immigrants and the agency of ex-slaves, who increasingly contested normative assumptions of white superiority and masculinity, made the dependent child and woman a requirement to sustain the myth of masculinity. This was the particular gendered historical moment that Caroline Pratt entered as she enrolled at Teachers College in 1892 and that would shape her emerging philosophies and pedagogies especially in regard to her notion of “play”.

At the forefront of the kindergarten and early childhood movement

was Teachers College. Pratt (1948) reflected on class one day when the instructor commanded everyone to “dance like butterflies.”

You taught children to dance like butterflies, when you knew they would much rather roar like lions, because lions are hard to discipline and butterflies aren't. All activity in the Kindergarten must be quiet, unexciting. All of it was designed to prepare children for the long years of discipline ahead. Kindergarten got them ready to be bamboozled by the first grade (pg 15).

Pratt was skeptical of the passive and idealist underpinnings of this type of play that was grounded in romantic notions of the child. While children were active, that activity was controlled, directed and facilitated by the teacher. Another example of this passive “play” was the common practice of beginning the day by sitting in a circle. This was a practice begun by Froebel through which children would supposedly gain an awareness of the unity of human life. Pratt described this as a “good deal of mystical fol-de-rol.” As Hauser suggests, Pratt anticipated the critique of “traditional Froebelian kindergartens [that] considered the educative value of play to be a demonstration of the symbolism of the laws of universal being” (pg 39). Embedded within these universal laws were essentialist notions that were rejected by Pratt. The purpose of “play” was not to unfold or unlock some predetermined notion of the individual. Nor was play to represent some metaphysical symbol of the unity of the human endeavor. Pratt had little patience for the “design-pricking” and “paper-weaving” of the Froebelian occupations. Play was not meant to reproduce life but to re-create life in ways that were more democratic. The formulaic, prescribed methods of Froebel which revolved around observation, imitation, direction and then expression functioned to mimic creativity, not to spur it. Expression, “true” play or self-activity was the beginning not the end of the lesson.

According to Snyder (1972), many kindergarteners of the first generation, who had been trained in Froebelian methods, struggled to understand the progressive definition of self-activity “as the effort of the child to solve a problem of concern to him as against the Froebelian interpretation of self-activity as the groping of the Divine within a child toward ultimate fulfillment in the Absolute, in God” (pg 176). In contrast to many early kindergartners who found comfort in the ordered program of Froebel with its prescribed materials and procedures, its spirituality, and its halo of mysticism, Pratt sought to ground children's early experiences in the “real” world. Pratt (1948) envisioned a community of children who could in their own way, through the child activity which we misguidedly call play, reproduce this world and its functioning. Such a community of little individuals, equals in size and strength and understanding as adults are equals in their own adult communities, would learn not only physical truths about the world, but social truths as well, the all-important truths of people with many individual differences who must live and work with each other. Certainly this was a harder way to teach children the unity of human endeavor than having them sit in a circle for half an hour at the beginning of the school day. To a traditional educator it was madness to turn children loose as I proposed to do. But to me it was criminal to bind them. I had no faith in mystical circles; my faith was in children (pg.27).

Rebelling against the Kindergarten program at Teachers College, she transferred to the Manual Training program of which she was equally critical due to the lack of relevancy of what she learned. Pratt's

experiences at Columbia were ones which cemented her rebellion against “bookworshipping universities.” As Hauser maintains when “experts” did not tell her anything she could use, it further intensified her pragmatic thinking about teaching. When pragmatism is understood as a philosophy in which “theory arises directly from and is accountable to experience” (Siegfried, 1996: 57) then the concept of “play” as children’s experience is more than a “method” of learning, it is the site of their theorizing.

Her understanding of play would emerge over numerous years and experiments beginning with her work at the Philadelphia Normal School for Schools, the Hartley School at the Henry Street Settlement House in New York, as well as her professional relationships with Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Marietta Johnson, Margaret Naumberg and other women educator activists. It was at the City and Country School (originally named the Play School) founded in 1914 that she eventually enacted her pragmatist philosophy and practice of play. While Pratt embodied many of the characteristics of “progressive” education and a child-centered philosophy, what Hauser maintains is that it is the social purpose of democratic education that was so important to Pratt that has been neglected. Children should not only learn to participate in a democratic society (the Deweyian perspective), but to create a democratic society through their social interactions learned at the earliest age through play. Play was the embodiment of democracy and became the center of the curriculum—in essence, play was the work of democracy. Relationships emerged through learning through experience which empowered children to see themselves as active agents in shaping their social world.

Consequently, all play activities had to be meaningful for the student, not the teacher (she differed from Montessori in this regard). Children had to participate voluntarily and chose their projects rather than following a set curriculum of learning skills. There was no set curriculum. All that was provided was a set of materials (this could be seen as a curriculum) –blocks, paper, crayons and clay. In addition students were provided real world experiences in the city (and in the country) through fieldtrips. The learning process began with some kind of field trip or just a trip outside and continued as students used materials to recreate their experience. There was no set curriculum, no subjects, no grading, no direct instruction and especially no reading. Subject matter was taught as was necessary as it emerged in play. For example, learning arithmetic took place in the context of making change when playing store.

Her only rule was that students had to work. Work at play. Play was not to release the inner child, or for amusement, play was the serious business of building democracy.

Central to play was the need for children to express their own experiences.

The younger children most often began this work with the unit blocks for which Pratt is famous. The complex Froebelian block activities that had been used up until then were seen as restrictive to children’s development. Pratt went on to design her own “unit blocks” that were versatile enough for children to construct their own knowledge. Pratt’s blocks were just not for “Free Play” (as in Patty Smith Hill’s kindergarten at Teachers College). For Pratt, blocks were “play material that embodied physical activity and learning opportunities about shape, size, scale, community interdependence and aesthetics” (Hauser, 58). Block building provided the opportunity for children to

learn about the relationships between experiences as well as concepts in their environment. Each experience a child has provides preparation for another and each concept that is developed opens the door to another.

Curriculum was taken from the environment, children observed what was going on around them and then through play they would make sense of it. Hauser (2006) notes in an article published by Pratt in *Progressive Education* in 1927 “we are not willing to have children dominated by subject matter. We want them to form strong habits of first hand research and to use what they find; we want them to discover relationships in concrete matter, so that they will know they exist when they deal with abstract forms, and will have habits of putting them to use” (pg 93). The focus on strong habits and conducting research and discovering relationships were critical to Pratt’s sense of democracy which would require continual research, questioning, discovery and thus strong habits. Consequently, central to her beliefs on learning was that children’s re-creation of experience through play was the best vehicle for learning (Pratt, 1924).

This social curriculum was developed beyond the early childhood grades as each year a new grade was added. As the play school expanded the teachers and students sought “work” that was meaningful and that would build community. For the older children this revolved around practical jobs that each grade level performed for the good of the school. These were not artificial jobs but actual things that had to be done. This entailed the work of producing blocks for the younger children, running a school store, a post office (that delivered messages, school records), a manuscript printing service (in which all reading materials were produced and copied including flash cards, reading charts and sentence strips) and the school lunch room where students served as waiters and table cleaners. Later on the print shop expanded to produce the school stationary, school newspaper, library cards and Parent Associations publications. The students organized a craftsman’s guild and established tests for apprentices, journeymen and master printers. These activities became the context for studying the social and economic structures of the middle ages. The content matter of the “traditional” disciplines emerged organically and in direct correspondence to the student’s self-directed activities. The school took on a life of its own with students creating the “Never Bust Toy Company,” and publishing *The Bookworms Digest* in which the children reviewed new children’s books. Other types of jobs and projects that emerged were weaving projects, a photography lab which led to physics and chemistry experiments, construction of school furniture, school repairs, and service learning projects. In essence, students took full responsibility for their school community and its democratic organization.

A central principle was that all work was valuable and meaningful. Undermining the rigid class distinctions usually associated with various types of work, children at the City and Country School experienced a holistic view of society in which all members were viewed as interdependent and shared equally in the responsibilities and decisions of its organization. This vision stood in stark contrast to the industrial order that had emerged at the turn of century. Rather than bifurcating work and play Pratt saw beauty and value in each and their interconnections. This vision of curriculum clearly rejected “vocationalism” (promoted by Charles Prossner and David Snedden) that was designed to bring the American curriculum in line with the industrial order (Kliebard, 1992). While the modern

workplace that emerged during the industrial era was characterized by a degradation of labor, social reformers, like Caroline Pratt, Jane Addams and John Dewey sought to “suffuse labor with a social context through education” (Kliebard, 1992: 193). This vision of industrial labor sought to reduce the drudgery of labor by situating “work” within a larger historic, artistic and social framework.

This radical socialist vision of schooling, in which the distinctions between work and play, as well as manual jobs and academic disciplines were disrupted, stood in stark contrast to both social efficiency and other progressive projects. Whereas social efficiency clearly sought to differentiate students for the purposes of accommodating American schools to meet the needs of a modern industrial society (Ravitch, 2000), the “project method” advocated by the progressive educator William Kilpatrick theorized that the “purposeful act” was at the heart of the educative process (Cremin, 1961). His 1918 article “The Project Method” emphasized two aspects of purposeful activity” 1) the activity had to be consonant with the child’s own goals and 2) the activity had to be located in a social environment in order that it might facilitate certain ethical outcomes that would “determine one’s conduct with reference to the welfare of the group” (Kilpatrick, 1918: 330).

While the mutual influence of Pratt and Kilpatrick is unknown, they clearly shared a similar vision of education, one that differed from Dewey’s by its rejection of fixed subject matter. As Cremin (1961) maintains Kilpatrick interpreted modern, industrial society as so unpredictable in terms of the nature of change, that he rejected all subject matter “fixed-in-advance.” Unlike Dewey who began with experience as a means of developing new curriculum that would be fixed, both Kilpatrick and Pratt rejected any notion of a fixed curriculum. While Kilpatrick focused on “problem solving” (embedded in a rational, scientific frame) as the critical feature his “project method,” Pratt saw the purpose of engaging in “projects,” what she termed “jobs program,” as not necessarily “solving” problems (a utilitarian approach), but as facilitating an epistemology that saw inquiry as an ongoing process that is always open to revision. This continual reconstruction of experience through “communal inquiry,” rather than individual autonomy and freedom, was central to Pratt’s pragmatism (Siegfried, 1996). Play was an experiment in cooperation that was the foundation for the social relations and ethics that were democracy.

Learning From Life Itself: Engendering Experience

I did some other, perhaps more important, learning for my future work, quite outside both the Normal School and my courses at the University. My guide was a young librarian with a Quaker background and profound concern for human values.

Caroline Pratt, 1948: 18

As Hauser suggests in chapter four of her book “Living and Learning in Philadelphia,” this time period (1894-1901) was a time of profound growth for Caroline and would set the stage for her opening her own school. After graduating from Teachers College she moved to Philadelphia to teach at the Philadelphia Normal School for Girls. While she refined her ideas about teaching, her primary influences in regard to her philosophy of education were to come from a different direction. Her “guide” was Helen Marot (1865 -1940) a social activist and feminist whose small library became the center of intellectual thought in Philadelphia. Pratt (1948) recalled “all shades of radicalism came there- Single Taxers, Socialists, philosophical

anarchists” (pg 18). Spending many hours there she began to see “another aspect of education. Listening to these people, many of them graybeards, as they argued and studied, I began to see education not as an end in itself, but as the first step in progress which should continue during a lifetime”(pg18). The school’s job was to “begin” education not to finish it.

Caroline’s education also continued in Philadelphia. First and foremost was her social investigation work in the custom tailoring trade for the U.S. Industrial Commission with Helen Marot. This was an eye-opening experience in which Caroline became aware of the appalling working conditions and social injustices suffered by the working classes. Conducting research among immigrant families was to profoundly shape Caroline’s philosophy of education: “It seemed to me that a school’s greatest value must be to turn out human beings who could think effectively and work constructively, who could in time make a better world than this for living in” (Pratt 1948: 19). The focus on the purpose of education as social justice would be the heart of Caroline’s philosophy from this time forward.

Hauser suggests Helen Marot’s library was a “place where Caroline and other women could engage in self-development, in contrast to the practice of self-sacrifice, which was expected of so many women at the turn of the century” (pg 45). The investigative work they did together galvanized them both as social activists. They also began a lifelong relationship both personally as well as politically. Their commitment was no less than “radical” social change. While Caroline worked on the education front, Helen continued her work investigating labor conditions, particularly those of children. From 1906-1913 she served as the executive secretary of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) of New York. She also became an avid writer and worked as editor for the socialist magazines *The Masses*, *the Dial*, and published three books including *Creative Impulse in Industry* in 1918 that according to Hauser was influenced by Pratt’s educational work. This book was sponsored by the Bureau of Educational Experiments (begun by Lucy Sprague Mitchell who later taught at Pratt’s City and Country School), and proposed the radical ideas that manual labor need not be degrading or for the purposes solely of profit, dependent on exploitation, but that “work” could be linked to its creative, community and collaborative aspects.

This vision of education as central to social change and transformation would become critical to Pratt’s philosophy and was deeply embedded in her vision of schools when she and Helen moved to Greenwich Village in New York in 1901. It was here that Caroline would begin her own experiment in education continuing her own education as she began teaching in the settlement houses in New York as well as in a private school. It was in these settings that she began to apply her ideas of self-directed play and education for life. She began her classes by providing materials and telling the children they could make what they pleased. There was only one rule-they had to work. In both settings the children eventually caught on and were quickly engaged in constructing their own worlds.

Her central pedagogical thrusts- self-directed activity, education for life and education for social betterment –continued to be shaped by the social influences and ideas that circulated. As she began to formulate her vision of her school she reflected: “What I sought was something so flexible, so adaptable, that children could use it without guidance and control. I wanted to see them build a world; I wanted to see them recreate on their own level the life about them, in which

they were too little to be participants, in which they were always spectators” (1948: 28). Her focus on children being active participants in the world and not mere spectators was a reflection of the deep trust she had in children. Trusting children to “build a world” was, I believe, a direct response to her gendered experiences in which women were expected to be docile, submissive and passive.

While the notion of self-direction in early childhood education is often traced to the romantic philosophers including Pestalozzi, Comenius and Froebel in reading Hauser’s book it becomes clear that this is only part of the story. For Pratt whose ideas of freedom were being shaped by radical feminist thought as well as her lived experiences with children and social injustice, self-direction took on a different meaning. It was not about abstract individual growth, but focused on creating community in relation to relevant, meaningful social concerns. Her faith that children could and would do this, was as radical as the idea that women could be full contributing members of society. That children and women were not content to be defined by ideologies that relegated them to passivity, domesticity and essentialized subject identities was, I believe at the heart of Pratt’s pedagogy.

Her pedagogy was part of the broader revolt against formalism in American culture- a refusal to heed the abstraction of womanhood, the calcified definition of female character and nature handed down by previous generations. Carolyn, along with Helen and numerous radical women educator activists sought to “experiment” with ways in which to change these rigid gender ideologies that imprisoned not only women but children, men and ultimately families. What was required was not only “individual” change but social readjustment. Influenced and informed by socialist and feminist thought these activists sought to understand the historical, social, economic and political ideologies that worked together to keep women, children and families oppressed. Helen became actively involved in the Heterodoxy Club of Greenwich Village. This group met at regular Saturday meetings. Marie Jenny Howe, one of the members of the club stated “we intend simply to be ourselves, not just our little female selves, but our whole big human selves.” Self-development rather than the traditional focus on self-sacrifice or submergence in the family were central.

Experimentation was required to understand what kinds of social relations were necessary to “free” individuals to assume equalitarian, community responsibilities. Pratt was convinced that change would come about when children were “free.” This freedom was not merely spiritual or psychological. In fact, for Pratt and other women educator activists it meant a radical restructuring of society in which economic subordination also needed to be eliminated. Pratt was undoubtedly influenced by contemporaries like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and others who proposed the socialization of home employments such as cooking and laundry. In addition “women’s work” as caretakers and nurturers were “de-essentialized” and critiqued as “free labor.” Gilman and others argued that housecleaning, cooking and childcare were better performed by specialized professionals. Numerous alternative lifestyles emerged from this period of feminist activism including settlement houses, cooperatives and, I would argue a radical vision of kindergartens. Caroline Pratt became a part of this movement. In fact, at the turn of the century women educator activists were at the forefront of experimenting with radical alternatives (Crocco et al, 1999). The settlement house movement provided one alternative to the nuclear,

heterosexual family unit, as well as utopian communities (Fairhope, Alabama home to Marietta Johnson). Another radical alternative proposed at the time by Henrietta Rodman and Crystal Eastman was that all mothering be collectivized. Since not all women had the specialized skills or desire to mother, there would be professional mothers (Goldstien, 1998). This notion of “professionalizing” motherhood was central to the development of early childhood education at the turn of the century. It is also exemplified in the work of early childhood educator Elizabeth Harrison, whose term “scientific motherhood” functioned to disrupt the biological determinism of motherhood (Munro, 1998a).

Pratt was clearly part of this movement. Although she never refers to herself as a feminist, she preferred radical, she chose not to marry and committed herself to a woman centered lifestyle. Central to this lifestyle was her role as a professional early childhood educator through which she contributed to deessentializing women’s role as “natural” teachers and mothers. For Pratt, the teaching of young children was critical to democracy, and this could not be left in the hands of non-experts. This was particularly apparent in her selection of teachers who taught at the City and Country School, as well as her relationships with parents. She begins her chapter “The Education of Parents” :

I have been accused to my face of hating parents, of wishing all children could be born orphans. I have been told that when I saw a mother walking down the street that I would walk clear around the block to avoid her (1948: 188). Particularly in the early days of the school Pratt (1948) was “afraid that they would get in our way, that they would curtail our freedom of action, try to steer us closer to the more familiar, more comfortable kind of school” (pg 189).

As Hauser notes, Pratt was often at odds with parents. This tension was not a mere matter of differences in ideas about pedagogy, but ironically it had to do with not trusting that parents had the same ideas in regards to social transformation. Democratic behavior began with children getting along with each other and with their families. Having children who did not merely conform blindly to authority or rules (including table manners, etiquette or parental authority) was critical to developing the critical thought and self-direction necessary for a democratic society. Democracy began at home. While she was at odds with parents over various issues (going to the circus, baseball games, etc) she saw the fruits of her labor when she saw “a new democracy growing between these parents and children” (pg 192). Children, who were accustomed to group discussion, saw that a family conference was a better way to reach a decision than methods dependent on parental autocracy.

Pratt had a difficult time seeing parents as experts. Nowhere did Pratt and parents come into conflict more than over the issue of reading. She reflected in the last chapter of her book “parents are anxious to have their children begin reading, they say, because reading is the beginning of their education...my entire life, and our school, and this very book have been devoted to the cause of demonstrating that education does not begin with books, but with life; that books are only a part of a child’s learning, not even the most important” (pg 201). The issue of Pratt’s “uneasy” parental relationships is discussed by Hauser in light of Pratt’s critique of authoritarianism. Ironically, her criticism did not extend to her own power relationships with

parents. She was firm in her convictions that teachers, not parents or mothers, had the specialized knowledge and were the experts. Pratt joined a generation of radical activists who sought to deessentialize the work of “mothering” as natural (thus making it unpaid labor as well as devalued and private) as a means to reshape social relations in more democratic ways.

For Pratt, childhood and child rearing was so important, that it should not be left to the everyday “mother” many of whom had very different understandings of child rearing. Instead, child rearing should be in the hands of experts. Professional mothers, well trained should raise children. Charlotte Perkins Gilman book, *Herland*, written in 1915, is of course the “utopian” account of one such society in which not only are there only women, but the responsibilities of “mothering” are relegated to class of “experts.” In this “utopia” Gilman describes a society in which mothering is revered as the highest art and is the epistemological foundation for all its societal structures. As I have discussed previously (Munro, 1998), Gilman’s radical displacement of dominant gender roles through the elevation of “mothering” was a revolutionary reenvisioning of the world in which “mothering” was no longer defined in biological terms but as a social phenomenon. For Gilman, and other feminist philosophers of the time, the oppression of women retarded all human progress. Until women were freed from domestic slavery so that mothering and homemaking were recognized as social not individual responsibilities, social change could not occur.

To view the early childhood movement as part of this larger vision of social change is critical to understanding the story of Caroline Pratt. The focus on social responsibility, not the individual; as well as on deconstructing essentialist notions of gender, and creating social change were central tenants of early childhood education.

Thus tracing the lineage of feminist educational history, one could surmise that early childhood education emerged in part from this radical analysis of dominant family relations as the turn of the century. Pratt’s refusal to capitulate to essentialized notions of gender ultimately resulted in her rejection of “progressive education” because it was not radical enough in its deconstruction of education, gender and children. This was another act of rebellion, of refusing to be imprisoned by a label.

Experiment With Not On

Experimenting means experimentation by children and not experimentations with children.

Caroline Pratt, *The New Republic*, 1930

No facts are sacred to me; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no past at my back.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

These words by Emerson might very well have guided many women pragmatists who saw experimentation as the heart of social education. Like her rejection of formulas, Pratt rejected a positivist understanding of “experiment” as a method. While turn of the century notions of “scientific method” and “experiment” were originally intended to make social analysis more “objective” and less “essentialized” –these methods quickly became used to “quantify” and “classify” rather than to “understand.” What Hauser makes clear is how central the concept of “experiment” was to Pratt’s philosophy and yet how different it was from traditional progressives either child

centered or social reconstructionist.

According to Seigfried (1998), pragmatist experimental methodology, like that of Pratt, “sought to replace both the palliative sentimentalism of charity work and the destructiveness of technocratic arrogance” (pg 182). Pragmatist experimentation challenged the notion of the “expert” by seeking the involvement of those who were directly affected by the social problems and issues of the day. This included not only the poor, immigrants, and minorities but especially for Pratt, this also included children. Experimentation was a way a life. It was not a “method,” but the heart of the ethics of democracy. Ongoing reflection and reconstruction of experience for the betterment of society was the basis of democracy. For women pragmatist educators including Pratt, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Marietta Johnson and Margaret Naumberg, the central question became “how this way of life” developed in children.

While the term “experiment” has often been understood within progressivism as connected with “experimental” or “laboratory” schools, Pratt rejected the notion of experimenting “on” children. Children were not “objects” of study, but were seen as co-participants in the quest to understand an ever-changing complex world. While her school was clearly an experiment, she saw the whole school community as engaged in an experiment. Just like the children experimented with ideas and creation, so to the teachers were engaged in a social experiment. This collaborative notion distinguished her from other “experimental models”.

Pratt was committed to her “experiment.” Education was an ongoing experiment. Part of this experience was also the process of reflection, the heart of scientific inquiry. Inquiry was not a means to determine absolute truths, but a means of engaging in the ongoing process of questioning. This vision of education was shared by both Lucy Sprague Mitchell and Carolyn Pratt. It was through their collective efforts that the Bureau of Educational Experiments was created. Conceptualized by Lucy Sprague Mitchell in 1916, the Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE) was dedicated to the unbiased, scientific study of children’s nature and growth. The laboratory would be Pratt’s Play School which was now housed in McDougall Alley at the back of the Mitchell’s house. This scientific study of the child would differ from Stanley Hall’s and Edward Thorndike’s study in two important ways. One- all research was done in a natural setting. Two- the goal was not to quantify but to describe. At the heart of this scientific study was the belief that the concept of the “child” needed to be liberated from fantasy and myth.

Turn of the century child study movements had already focused the scientific gaze on children. Kleibard (1992) traces a “science of child development” to two main factors: 1) science would liberate education from its preoccupation with the written word, whether sacred or secular, that had dominated the curriculum at least since the days of Erasmus 2) science held out a the promise that a new developmental psychology could provide the truly scientific basis for the curriculum that was so lacking in earlier forms of psychology. While these motivations were promising to “exorcise” notions of the “child” as born with original sin, and thus subject to continual regulation, repression and punishment, these motivations were to unfold in complex and contradictory ways.

While “science” had the potential to liberate it also became a vehicle for social control. For G. Stanley Hall and the early child-study

movement, the focus was on determining the natural inclination of children through scientific data gathering. This focus on the natural instincts of children while rooted in science also reflected Hall's basic belief that if children's instincts were repressed in childhood that they would manifest themselves in adulthood as anti-social behavior. For Hall, the "real goal of self-knowledge afforded by not repressing feelings, moods and impulses" was to guarantee the rational, disciplined adult" (Winfield 2007: 116). Walkerdine (1990) has suggested that the suppression and control of rebellion through "liberating" the child guarantees the rational subject precisely because children who were not coerced would not need to rebel, thus guaranteeing the status quo.

According to Baker (2001), the "period of childhood was now subjected to internal and external forms of regulations that it had never before known" (498). This scientific gaze that was the focus of the child study movement was according to Baker (2001) an abstracted, nineteenth century form of flogging, in which adult desire for the child's body was "purified" by abstraction, reordered and expressed as "scientific" fact. Pinar (2006) maintains that men's desire to study children is linked to reestablishing white masculinity and racial superiority through reifying the patriarchal family. Pratt and Mitchell were drawing on the discourses of "science" as a means to expose "essentialized" notions in a world that saw women as irrational and child like.

How does the "scientific" method of feminist pragmatists take on new meanings when analyzed from this gendered perspective. Children in Pratt's Play School were treated as responsible, intelligent human beings, capable of constructing their own worlds. Pratt's pedagogy was directly linked to her own lived experience and desire to be no longer imprisoned or bound by gender norms. Women pragmatists, according to Seigfried (1996), were interested in disproving notions about the inferiority of women and in improving women's actual situation. If the child could be shown to be a "rational" "self-directed" "hard working" "capable of growth" then it would follow that women also possessed these attributes.

The BEE organized a nursery school for children ages 15 months to three years old who would then go to Pratt's City and Country School. These two schools became "laboratories." As Hauser points out, a unique feature of the BEE projects was that the observations of the children were done in a natural learning environment rather than a lab. The focus was not on controlling children, but on observing how children controlled and experienced their environments and activities through social relations. Towards this end Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Caroline Pratt and Harriett Johnson worked together over 10 years to collect some of the most detailed and longitudinal case studies of children.

The data collected addressed the social, psychological, intellectual and physical growth of the children. Systematic observations were documented over consecutive years. Teachers were fully engaged in this research and collected data by keeping a daily record of children's physical habits, emotional upsets and relations with other people. Teachers kept daily diaries and for each child a record of one full day each month including verbatim speech records and descriptions of all activities (Antler, 1987). Detailed physiological records were also kept. Height and weight, annual stool and urine tests, eye tests, electrocardiograms, chest X-rays, measurements of wrist spans and studies of teeth were all part of the records.

Psychological testing was also conducted. Buford Johnson and her assistant Louise Schriefer, conducted personality tests as well as tests of motor coordination. Social records were kept with full family histories, account of home environments, personality tests of the parents and records of grandparents' health and "racial-genetic" histories. Franz Boaz and other consultants were brought in to aid in interpreting the data. This kind of revolutionary holistic data collection that sought to deessentialize notions of child development and growth using science was revolutionary. Few other progressive schools had such detailed record keeping and used such collaborative methods. What distinguished the BEE from other scientific centers and the work of Hall was its focus on using the data to continually evaluate and reshape children's experiences in the school and with the curriculum in light of new evidence. This was quite distinct from other scientific endeavors that sought to use data to train children or parents. Growth, according to Antler (1987) at the BEE was not correlated with training but with observing and fostering "natural behavior" (pg 289).

Cremin (1961) notes that the rise of "educational measurement and scientism" and "expressionism" after WWI, was the result of progressivism increasingly being cut off from its roots in social reform. I would maintain that Pratt's vision of "science" and "experiment," while undoubtedly shaped by the discourses of science promoted by Hall, Thorndike and others, was not one grounded in positivism but in the pragmatic conception of science as the emancipatory potential of inquiry through the continual reconstruction of experience.

Conclusion

While concepts like play, experience, child-centered learning, and democracy have been central to progressive thought, these terms have remained elusive. We think we know what they mean until we try to put them in words. Then the trouble begins. Not putting them into words is what Pratt did. While Pratt and other women progressive philosophers have often been accused of being "atheoretical" or "apolitical" because they refused to articulate a theory, it is precisely this "refusal" that is so political. Rejecting categories and theories was central to keeping ideas in play. This book honors this tradition by avoiding imposing theoretical frameworks. Instead it takes the reader to the classroom of Caroline Pratt's City and Country School to experience learning from this radically profound perspective. The concepts of play, experience, child centeredness and experiment come alive. The rich insights are so tangible that as a reader I saw not only the possibilities for this pedagogy but also the limitations. Hauser has created a space for Caroline Pratt to take her place among other pragmatist philosophers and to engage in the complicated conversation that is curriculum.

References

Antler, J. (1987). *Lucy Sprague Mitchell: The Making of Modern Woman*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Baker, B. (2001). *In Perpetual Motion: Theories of Power, Educational History and the Child*. New York: Peter Lang.

Bederman, G. (1995). *Manliness and Civilization: A cultural history of gender and race*

in the United States, 1880-1917. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cannella, G. (1998). *Early Childhood Education: A Call for the Construction of Revolutionary Images*. In W.F. Pinar (Ed.) *Curriculum: Toward New Identities*. New York: Garland. pp. 157-185.

Carlton, P. (1986). "Caroline Pratt: A Biography." PhD. Diss. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1986.

Counts, G. (1932). *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* New York: John Day.

Cremin, L. (1961). *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education 1876-1957*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Crocco, M., Munro, P., & Weiler, K. (1999). *Pedagogies of Resistance: Women Educator Activists 1860-1960*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Dewey, J. (1928). *Progressive Education and the Science of Education*. *Progressive Education*, 5(3), pp.197-204.

Goldstein, L. (1998). *The Distance Between Feminism and Early Childhood*. In M. Hauser & J. Jipson (Eds). *Intersections: Feminisms/Early Childhoods*. New York: Peter Lang. pp. 51-63.

Hirsch, M. (1986). "Caroline Pratt and the City and Country School 1914-1945." PhD. Diss., Rutgers University, New Jersey.

Kaufman, P. (1984). *Women Teachers on the Frontier*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

Kilpatrick, W. H. (1918). *The Project Method*. Teachers College Record, XIX.

Kleibard, H. (1992). *Forging the American Curriculum*. New York: Routledge.

Munro, P. (1998). *Engendering Curriculum History*. In W.F. Pinar (Ed.), *Curriculum: Toward New Identities* (pp. 263-294). New York: Garland Press.

Munro, P. (1998a). *Turning Facts into Puzzles: Feminist and Poststructural Perspectives on Life History Research*. In M. Hauser & J. Jipson (Eds.), *Intersections: Feminisms/Early Childhoods* (pp. 111-136). New York: Peter Lang.

Pinar, W.F. (2006). *The Synoptic Text*. New York: Peter Lang.

Pratt, C. (1924). *Experimental Practice in the City and Country School*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

- Pratt, C. (1948). *I learn from Children: An Adventure in Progressive Education*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Ravitch, D. (2000). *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Seigfried, C. H. (1996). *Pragmatism and Feminism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Snyder, A. (1972). *Dauntless Women in Childhood Education 1856-1931*. Washington D.C.: Association for Childhood Education International.
- Vandewalker, N. (1908). *The kindergarten in American Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Walkerdine, V. (1990). *Schoolgirl Fictions*. New York: Verso.
- Winnfield, A. G. (2007). *Eugenics and Education in America*. New York: Peter Lang.