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Learning from Children: learning from Caroline Pratt (1867-1954). Early Progressives in Early Years Education

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ABSTRACT This review of Caroline Pratt's life and work in early years education includes an account of how a six-year-old boy taught a woman in her thirties what she needed to know in order to open a school – in 1914 – that continues to this day, a school that was, in the founder's own words, fitted to the child and not the other way around. It finds a clear case of parallel evolution in some of her contemporaries in England, and examines aspects of her beliefs and practice that are highly challenging and contentious for educators today. Caroline Pratt's story invites us to think about how reliable learning from children, or learning from the past, can ever be. Maybe all learners, teachers and children, yesterday, today and tomorrow, cannot escape the grand responsibility of asking their own questions, and of being in charge of their own learning.[1]

Caroline Pratt was born in 1867, three years before Maria Montessori, when Margaret McMillan was six years old and John Dewey eight. Growing up in rural New York State, by the age of ten she could turn a team of horses and a wagon in less space than a grown man would take. At 13, she was baking bread for the whole family; school was a relatively unimportant part of her life – until she was 16, when as a result of a casual remark by her uncle ('Carrie was always good with children'), she became a village school teacher. By 1892 she was studying at Teachers College in New York on the kindergarten course, from which she soon withdrew in dissatisfaction, moving to the manual training shop; two years later she was awarded her teaching diploma.

Seven years passed with her, in her own words, 'teaching young women to saw to a line' in the Philadelphia Normal School, where she became more and more dissatisfied, convinced that she was helping to perpetuate a system without any real educational value. It was not until 1901 that she resigned and

moved back to New York to put her own ideas about teaching and learning into practice – and this was the move that made all the difference. A visit to a friend with an interesting six-year-old son was the experience that showed her what she wanted to do with her life. Going to the nursery, she found him hard at play, the floor covered with a miniature railroad system:

> He was building with blocks, toys, odd paper boxes, and any material he could find. Some of it was obviously salvaged from the wastepaper basket. As I watched him push his freight train onto a siding while a fast express roared by to stop at a station where lines of passengers and automobiles were waiting, as I listened to the unceasing accompaniment of happy noises in realistic imitation of train whistles and bells and automobile horns, it seemed to me that this child had discovered an activity more satisfying to him than anything I had ever seen offered to children.
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> ... I thought that this was one little boy's way of learning about the world he lived in; he had observed for himself, had gathered his facts, and was here, before my eyes, ... setting down his understanding of the way things worked, the relationships of facts to each other, the causes and effects, the purposes and functions. This was thinking, this was learning. This was the way a young child, if freed to do so, would go about educating himself on the subject which was of the most immediate, intense interest to him – the world in which he lived ... I yearned to see a child world peopled with such happy children as this little boy. (p. 19)

The first years back in New York, fired by her vision of a different kind of school for young children, were unsuccessful, marked by commercial failures, false starts and setbacks, but in 1913 she opened a short-lived trial school for just six five-year-olds in a settlement house on the West Side. When the six children walked into the carefully prepared room, they found copious quantities of crayons, paper and clay, and a generous supply of wooden blocks that Caroline Pratt had made herself; they immediately fell to playing with a will. Her great experiment had begun: 'I couldn't have asked for a more appropriate demonstration of my belief in the serious value of children's play ... How much those five-year-olds taught me in two short months!' (pp. 30-31).

This was the unlikely, unassuming, small-scale beginning of what later became a seriously impressive large-scale adventure in alternative education that continues to this day. At the age of 80, after 30 years work in the school, Caroline Pratt wrote an absorbing account of her life's work, giving full credit to those who had taught her how to be a teacher: *I Learn from Children* was first published in 1948.

Lions and Butterflies

Caroline Pratt tells us very little about the kindergarten course at Teachers College in the 1890s – just one good memory and one bad. First, she describes with enthusiasm the plentiful provision of plain hardwood blocks, designed by Patty Hill, an eminent early childhood educator of the day, in charge of the kindergarten at the college. Children used these building blocks during their free periods: 'To me those play periods seemed the most important part of the school day.' And the bad memory, which continued to trouble her for many years, was of being instructed, with her fellow students, 'to dance like butterflies'. Reflecting on this lesson, more than 50 years later, she wrote:

> 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. My first act of rebellion, then, was to go to the Dean and announce that Kindergarten was not for me. (p. 11)

So no wonder that when she opened that first school, in 1913, it was not on traditional kindergarten lines. It was to be a 'Play School', a telegraphic way of saying that in her way of teaching, the children learned by playing. It was to be a school where children could roar – and play – like lions, where life was exciting, worth living on its own terms, not by merely fluttering like a butterfly. And it was to be full of blocks – with which, as her friend's son had shown her, the children would learn about the world as he had done, by 'thinking about it, reasoning about it, accepting this, rejecting that, putting it together and making it work' (p. 28).

Above all it was to be a democratic school, where children were to learn how to be 'responsible citizens in a democracy, perhaps some day in a democratic world'. But this aspiration calls into question the need for 'iron discipline, the suppression of playfulness and friendliness, of adventure or individualism wherever it raises its head'. If children are to be citizens, friendly, playful and adventurous,

> … [w]hy then the screwed-down benches, the interdiction on speech, the marching through the halls in silent single-file, the injunction on the teacher to behave like a classroom Hitler? (p. 167)

After her two-month trial period in cramped quarters in the settlement house, Caroline Pratt was offered a three-room apartment in Greenwich Village, where she recruited another six children, not from the artistic and literary set, living in Bohemian attic studios, but from the sons and daughters of 'white collar folk, the respectable poor'. A year later, another expansion, this time into an entire house in the same area, where the Play School remained for three years. The children attending this school were aged from four to six, and were offered a

curriculum of two chief elements – block play and woodwork. The woodwork benches were stocked with real hammers, nails, rulers, saws and planes: all the tools and materials necessary to make the barges, wagons, carts, tugs, drays and derricks that the children incorporated into their increasingly complex and dramatic block play.

A third vital component of the children's active lives in the school was an urban version of 'nature study'. Instead of learning about leaves and grass, cows and butterflies (in rather short supply in the congested district of the Play School), the children made journeys of exploration in the crowded streets, watching the wagons coming in from the country, bringing produce to the wholesale markets, and spending a good deal of time at the docks, watching the river traffic, the tugs, scows and coal-barges, all the while asking innumerable questions.

Other dramatic plays included restaurants and shops, in which the children first felt the need for numbers: 'arithmetic began quite naturally to creep in …' The children used real money in their shop play, and real fractions of an inch in their woodwork, with an easy confidence that at first astounded their teacher. But, taking thought, she explains what was happening by recognising that arithmetic is 'a tool subject'; then it is no surprise

> … how much children can learn of the tool subjects when the use of the tool is immediately apparent, when indeed the need for the tool comes before the instruction. Children learn eagerly and well when they have need of the knowledge ... The drive of the child's own desire to learn carried him, at six, right into the stronghold of traditional schooling; voluntarily he tackled even arithmetic! (p. 50. NB: the exclamation mark is Caroline Pratt's, not mine – I think she *was* still surprised.)

'Schools of Tomorrow'

At this point in its development, the school received a distinguished visitor – Evelyn Dewey, collecting material for a book she was writing with her father John Dewey, which was published in 1915 as *Schools of Tomorrow.* The Play School is mentioned in the chapter entitled 'Play', which is devoted to descriptions of a number of 'modern kindergartens', and quite a few grade schools, where teachers had recognised the educational value of play. But more significantly, the Play School also appears in the chapter called 'The Reorganisation of the Curriculum', in which the Deweys reach back to Rousseau and Pestalozzi to argue the case for 'learning by doing', as a general principle, in place of an academic, abstract approach, in which the curriculum is no more than 'an external presentation lacking meaning and purpose as far as the child is concerned' (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 73).

Caroline Pratt was well aware that she was living and learning in turbulent times, with controversy swirling about the world of education, stirred up by, among others, Maria Montessori and 'above all, John Dewey'. She tells

how the Play School was visited by many teachers and would-be teachers 'dissatisfied with traditional methods and newly inspired by these revolutionary approaches to education'. But she refused to be drawn into the fray, to speak in public, to mark out a blueprint or to formulate a 'system'.

Nevertheless, Caroline Pratt did, in time, draw up a curriculum chart to act as a framework for what was actually happening in the school. She did not start with aims or abstractions of any kind, but divided the weekly routine into two core elements – *Play Experiences*, which included block play, dramatic play and art – and *Practical Experiences*, including projects in the woodwork shop, cooking (from apple sauce to homemade bread) and care of materials. These two broad – no, enormous – areas were supplemented by *Techniques*, including sense training, number work, language arts and music; and by *Enrichment* – trips discussions, books, stories – all possible ways of seeking and sharing information. But none of this was translated into learning objectives, levels, standards or targets; there were no daily/weekly plans, forecasts or schemes of work. Caroline Pratt was mightily proud of this:

> My resistance to anything in the nature of a blueprint was instinctive and desperate. I know that I trusted in the school as a living, growing organism to produce something beyond any blueprint if children and teachers and I were all given scope for our own initiative. My greatest effort, it seems to me now, went into keeping this door open, resisting at every point the fatigue, the discouragement, the fears which would throw us back upon the beaten track ... I wanted the teachers' eyes on the children, not on a chart or table of study. (p. 64)

Other Times, Other Places

Caroline Pratt was not, of course, alone in her insistence that learning from children is at the heart of effective pedagogy, and that children's desires and interests are at the heart of worthwhile learning. Across the Atlantic, some years before the Play School opened its doors, the teacher Harriet Finlay-Johnson was running a village school in Sussex. In 1906, she too received an eminent visitor – Edmond Holmes, at that time Chief Inspector of Schools.[2] After his retirement, Holmes described the school at length in his great work *What Is and What Might Be* (1911); Harriet Finlay-Johnson appears as the teacher 'Egeria', and her very real school as 'Utopia', the living embodiment of 'what might be'. Holmes persuaded 'Egeria' to write about her work, and some of her arguments could almost have come from the pages of *I Learn from Children*:

> I feel sure that all educationists worthy of the name will agree that in the present day, more than ever before, only the very best will be good enough for the education of our children. Yet I cannot help thinking also that, in our conscientious search for that best, we (even the most thoughtful of us) may lose sight of the *child* in our hunt for

> the *method*. It was my endeavour to treat with children, rather than with methods and theories, which led me to throw more and more of the initial effort on to the children themselves ... A child learns, and retains what he is learning better by actually *seeing and doing* things, which is a guiding principle of Kindergarten. (Finlay-Johnson, 1911, p. 14)

She started on this endeavour with nature study, which, she soon realised,

> … to be of any value, must be Nature *really studied by the child itself*. It must not be Nature filtered through pictorial illustration, text-book, dried specimen and scientific terms…it must be the real study of living and working nature, absorbed in the open air, under conditions which allow for free movement under natural discipline. (Finlay-Johnson, 1911, p. 16)

And then Finlay-Johnson applied the same principle to the teaching of history, which could best be learned by continuing what she called the Kindergarten principle of seeing, doing and playing for older children. 'Historical play' took its place in her curriculum, but led by the children, not by the teachers: 'Instead of letting the teacher originate or conduct the play, I demanded that ... the play must be the child's own' (Finlay-Johnson, 1911, p. 19).

Another example of parallel evolution in England comes from 1924-7, by which time the Play School, now known as the City and County School, was providing for children aged from 3 to 13 at premises on West 12th Street, where it still functions today. In 1924 Susan Isaacs took up the post of director at a new experimental school, the Malting House, in Cambridge. During her three years at this small school for children aged three to ten, she kept detailed anecdotal records of the children's activities, their thinking, their feeling, their play, their interests and enquiries, which formed the basis for her two important books *Intellectual Growth in Young Children* (1930) and *Social Development in Young Children* (1933). Here it is worth singling out her abiding interest in children, in which she greatly resembles Caroline Pratt.

Some of her friends advised her to omit much of her material, as it was likely to offend, but Isaacs ignored them: 'I was not prepared to select only such behaviour as pleased me, or as fitted into the general convention as to what little children should feel and talk about' (Isaacs, 1933, p. 19). She explains this uncompromising position most succinctly: 'The reason is that I happen to be interested in *everything* that little children do and feel' (Isaacs, 1933, p. 13). Learning from children, she is arguing, is of little value if you choose to censor what you see, or ignore what children are trying to tell you about how the world looks to them, and how it feels to be a child.

Another striking admonition, completely in tune with Caroline Pratt's way of thinking, comes from a later date, when Isaacs was teaching at the London Institute of Education. In an examiner's report on a psychology course in a teacher training college, she wrote:

> I do wish we could give up teaching these dreary old theories of play. It seems to me pathetic that students spend so much time discussing Schiller, Groos etc. instead of going direct to children at play and seeing for themselves what play does for children's development. (Quoted in Gardner, 1969, p. 155)

Equally striking is Isaacs' pithy summary of the three spontaneous activities that filled the days of the children at the Malting House:

> – The love of movement and of perfecting bodily skills
> – The delight in make-believe, the expression of the world within
> – The interest in actual things and events, the discovery of the world without. (Isaacs, 1932, ch. 4)

This marvellously comprehensive curriculum, so different from a blueprint, or table of study, would surely have appealed to Caroline Pratt; it is plain to me that she would have felt perfectly at home in the school room and garden of the Malting House, co-existent in time with her own school in downtown New York.

'Yes, and …' and 'Yes, but …'

I was once talking to a friend about a book I'd been reading (possibly, probably, something by an early progressive educator, H. Caldwell Cook perhaps, or Susan Isaacs herself) and enthusing about how I agreed with everything the author was saying. My friend was appalled that I read books in order to agree with them. 'When I write a book,' she said, 'I write in the hopes that people will *disagree* with me.' I took this injunction to heart, and while I do not obey her on every single occasion, it is appropriate to consider here what sort of a balance Caroline Pratt strikes in her readers – between ardent consent (the story so far) and downright dissent.

There are several passages in *I Learn From Children* that I find disagreeable and disturbing. Take this, for example, from the closing page of the final chapter, 'The Education of Parents':

> I have been of two minds about parents all my life, half the time wondering why they sometimes give so little of themselves to their children – and the other half of the time convinced that children would be better off without them altogether. It is at these latter times, no doubt, when I have been out of patience with their stubborn unwillingness to see a truth about children which is perfectly obvious to me, that I have heaped them with the insults they accuse me of. (p. 196)

Whatever sort of insult can she mean? She is not afraid to specify:

> Parents have been cross with me when I have told them without mincing words that their child's problem is a home problem; yet most children's problems are home problems. (p. 195)

Barbara Beatty, the author of a comprehensive history of pre-school education in America, ascribes this singular lack of sympathy to Caroline Pratt's unmarried and childless adult life: 'Maybe in part because she was not a mother herself, Pratt deprecated mothering. A mother's main job, in her view, was to help her child become independent ... Not surprisingly, some parents resented Pratt's dismissal of their importance in their children's lives' (Beatty, 1995, p. 139).

Not surprising indeed! But it *would* be surprising, would it not, if teachers today were to concur with Caroline Pratt's conclusions on this subject. Surely the majority of those in the early years teaching community now know better, and appreciate the absolute necessity of trusting and harmonious relations between home and school, between part-time teachers (five hours/five days a week in term time) and full-time parents? Although there are always people (some eminent and powerful) ready to locate the cause of any educational difficulty or setback firmly in the home, or in the children themselves, I think that the vast majority of teachers accept their responsibility to work *with* parents, all parents, rather than against them.

Learning from Children – Harder Than it Sounds?

In the foreword to her book, Caroline Pratt introduces her tremendous claim: 'What I know of children I have learned from them.' But inevitably perhaps, there is one spectacular gap in all her learning. It appears in a discussion about the place of fairy tales in a child's literary diet – and her position is that, although fairy tales are all very well in themselves, they are poisonous for young children. Her argument is based on a profound mistrust of children's capacity to distinguish 'between the real and the fancied'. Children are not just *confused* by magic carpets and wishing rings, she claims – fairy tales discourage them from trying to understand 'the real world'. Thus those who offer fairy tales to these inadequate young minds are seriously handicapping children's capacity to learn to live in that real world (p. 73).

Caroline Pratt goes on to dwell, over several pages, on the importance of imagination – a good thing – and the evils of fantasy – a very bad thing indeed – 'a bloodless and unprofitable exercise for young children'. To illustrate this distinction, she describes (or imagines?) a child who has made a stick of wood into a boat: 'in this he is indeed showing a very vivid imagination'. But he mustn't go too far:

> If he says 'a big cow came up out of the water and wrecked my boat' he may be merely making a joke, provided he knows cows. Or he may be misinformed, in which case ... what he needs is not admiration for his flights of fancy ... but clarification of his facts ... When he is unrealistic, it is because his facts are misunderstood,

> misused, misappropriated reality. He is handicapped, not helped by his confusion… (p. 78)

As I sit shaking my head over this distressing passage of 'misunderstood, misused reality', I wonder which of many champions of children's imaginative lives to call as expert witness against it. John Dewey perhaps?

> We hear much nowadays about the cultivation of the child's 'imagination'. Then we undo much of our own talk and work by a belief that the imagination is some special part of the child that finds its satisfaction in some one particular direction, generally speaking, that of the unreal and make-believe, of the myth and made-up story. Why are we so hard of heart and so slow to believe? The imagination is the medium in which the child lives. (Dewey, 1990, p. 61)

Or shall I turn to Caroline Pratt's close contemporary Kornei Chukovsky, and his brilliant classic text *From Two to Five* (first published in 1925 and subsequently expanded), where he writes in passionate defiance of official Soviet edicts against fairy tales? Here's just a sample of his attack on the 'regressive pedologists' of the day:

> To fear that some little fairy tale will turn [children] into romantics, into incompetents for practical living – this fear can possess only those bureaucratic contrivers who, attending meetings from morning till night, never see a live child ... Their inventions about the harm of fairy tales are in themselves an insane fairy tale which overlooks all concrete facts. This is the only kind of fairy tale that we need to combat – the fairy tale of regressive pedologists about the fairy tale. (Chukovsky, 1974, ch. V)

Perhaps a more recent author, such as Kieran Egan, would be more convincing, although, confusingly, he claims that the problem starts with Dewey and the way that educators have misread him. Misled by their misreading, they have focused their attention on

> … the mundane and practical world in which [children] live. What has been lost is the ability to see that world as the child sees it, transfigured by fantasy. (Egan, 1988, p. 204)

Egan goes on to suggest that Piaget too is partly to blame for this sad loss, in that his interest in logical-rational aspects of cognitive development prevented him from seeing other aspects of children's thinking: he saw romance and fantasy as contaminations of the child's pure intelligence, whereas Egan argues that

> [t]he child who cannot, on the one side, conserve liquid quantity may, on the other, lead a vivid intellectual life brimming with knights, dragons, witches and star warriors. It would be needlessly

> bold to predict which is more important to future intellectual growth. (Egan, 1988, p. 23)

No, the best of all witnesses will be the incomparable Vivian Gussin Paley, a fellow American kindergarten teacher, much revered for her own capacity to learn from children, evidenced in her first-hand accounts of life in the kindergarten classes she herself has been teaching over many years. In *Wally's Stories*, an early masterpiece, she sums it all up:

> Magic weaves in and out of everything the children say and do. The boundaries between what the child thinks and what the adult sees are never clear to the adult, but the child does not expect compatibility. The child himself is the ultimate magician ... If he can imagine something, it exists ... As soon as he learns a language well enough, and **before** he is told he cannot invent the world, he will explain everything. (Paley, 1981, pp. 30-31)

And the Moral of This Story Is …

Or morals, perhaps. Some possibilities: could it be that 'learning from children' may be, for all its valuable insights, sometimes strangely incomplete? Susan Isaacs herself, as my friends and colleagues never cease to remind me, is shockingly relaxed about the contested concept of fixed 'ability'; she writes, for example, about 'a large class of children, ranging in ability from the nearly defective to the very superior' (Isaacs, 1932, ch. 4), and in the same work she asserts that '[o]f all the differences between one child and another, inborn intelligence turns out to be the most stable and the most permanent ... The best teaching in the world may prove barren if it fall on the stony ground of an inherently dull and lifeless mind' (Isaacs, 1932, ch. 2).

Perhaps it is just that we hope for far too much from eccentric individuals who set up experimental schools of any kind (or free schools in the country where Gove is King)? Even if they start, as Caroline Pratt, Harriet Finlay-Johnson and Susan Isaacs did, from irreproachable principles and purposes, which is more than can be said of the Govite free-schoolers, can they be expected to get everything right, every last detail perfectly in place? After all, as Joe E. Brown famously remarked in the final frames of *Some Like it Hot*, 'Nobody's perfect.'

Or is Caroline Pratt's position on parents, or fairy tales, an early manifestation of what Ronald King (1978) discovered in his fascinating but contentious study of three infant schools – that '[i]t is the definitions of the powerful that prevail'? King concluded, to his own satisfaction at least, that teachers' definitions of children – as innocent, for example – shape their perceptions of classroom events and that their actions tend to confirm their ideas as realities. So Caroline Pratt's definition of parents as problems shapes – and confirms – her troubled relationship with them. And her definition of children as incapable of distinguishing between the real world of West 12th

Street and the fantastic world of their imagination shaped (and damagingly misshaped) her perceptions of their play with blocks and their vulnerability to witches and fairies.

Maybe all of the above need to be taken into account whenever we read stirring tales of life in classrooms, written by those who want to show us the one true way. And maybe we need to recognise an enduring fault line in the history of early childhood education. Our honoured ancestors were driven by inner conviction and a sense of mission. Their zeal led them to challenge the beliefs and practices of others, rather than ask challenging questions about their own. Maybe we put too much trust in the certainty of others, and swallow their ideas too greedily. Maybe we should work harder on our own initiative, and go more often, in Isaacs' words, 'direct to the children at play to see for ourselves'. At the same time, we need to cultivate a healthy uncertainty, a capacity for caution and doubt, and an inexhaustible determination to go on asking questions.

As the great writer (of fairy tales as well as adult novels) George MacDonald wrote, and as I never tire of quoting, 'Every question is a door handle.' Caroline Pratt, as we have seen, put her greatest effort into 'keeping this door open'; asking our own questions may be the very best way of doing so.

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations in this article are from the Perennial Library edition of Caroline Pratt's autobiography, *I Learn from Children* (Pratt, 1990).

[2] In his autobiography, *In Quest of an Ideal*, Holmes writes of this visit: 'That day will always be marked with chalk in my calendar, for it is no exaggeration to say that it made a new epoch in my life ... Then and there my eyes were opened' (1920, p. 117).

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