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Jeroen Staring  
*Bank Street College of Education*

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# Caroline Pratt: Progressive Pedagogy *In Statu Nascendi*

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By Jeroen Staring

This article explores two themes in the life of Caroline Pratt, founder of the Play School, later the City and Country School. These themes, central to Harriet Cuffaro's values as a teacher and scholar, are Pratt's early progressive pedagogy, developed during experimental shopwork between 1901 and 1908; and her theories on play and toys, developed while observing children play with her Do-With Toys and Unit Blocks between 1908 and 1914. Focusing on her early and previously unexplored writings, this article illustrates how Caroline Pratt developed a coherent theory of innovative progressive pedagogy.



*Figure 1 (left). Original drawing of Do-With doll, by Caroline Pratt. Figure 2 (right): Two wooden, jointed Do-With dolls. (Photo: Jeroen Staring, 2011; Courtesy City and Country School, New York City)*

## Caroline Pratt's Education

In 1884, Caroline Louise Pratt, age 17, had her first teaching experience at the summer session of a school near her hometown, Fayetteville, New York. Two years later, she took the Regents' Advanced Examination and in 1887, she was appointed assistant teacher at the Fayetteville village school. In 1894, she finished a two-year professional diploma course in manual training and kindergarten methods at Teachers College in New York City. The manual training course was based on a method of teaching woodwork crafts started by Calvin Woodward at the Manual Training School in St. Louis. Pratt immediately moved to Philadelphia where she taught woodworking at the Normal School for Girls until 1901 (*Journal of Education*, 1896).

The *School Journal* (1895) offers a portrayal of her teaching practice at Philadelphia Normal, where new female teachers became special teachers "able to correlate and co-ordinate the woodworking with the language, arithmetic, and other work of the school" (p. 475). The report (see Figure 3) depicts Pratt already advancing a position she would explicitly advocate later in her life: the woodshop represents the school's heart, and manual work is fundamental in the curriculum (pp. 475-476; emphasis added):

*Every girl makes her own working drawings, figuring until she has them mathematically correct, and then starts away sewing and planning with the precision of a skilled carpenter. They do not make articles such as carpenters produce, however, but devote themselves simply to exercises illustrative of the principles of carpentry, devoting special attention to the pedagogy and relations of woodworking in other school work and studying how the interest of the child in the manual work may be carried over into other studies.*



Figure 3. Excerpt from *School Journal* (1895).

## Pratt's Early Progressive Pedagogy

In Philadelphia, Pratt experimented with alternative teaching methods. In 1896, she attended a *Sloyd* woodworking summer course at Nääs, Sweden. (*Sloyd*, after the Swedish *Slöjd*, refers to a method of teaching woodwork crafts that originated in Finland around 1865.) Later, Pratt (1901)

offered a clear critique of *Sloyd*, which she viewed as rigid, brushing aside all individuality in teaching: “I consider the Swedish system of sloyd dangerous, because it does not admit of play of individuality to great enough extent upon the part of the teacher” ( p. 419). She added, “The danger . . . lies in the fact that as a system it is considered permanent, and no system was ever that” (p. 420). In 1897, Pratt enrolled in a University of Pennsylvania manual training course designed for teachers. At the same time, with her lifelong companion Helen Marot, she immersed herself in the literature of labor, social reform, and education. Pratt’s search for progressive teaching methods in light of her developing political stance is beyond the scope of this essay (for more detail, see Staring, 2013a-b), but it is important to note the influence of social and political issues on her consciousness. After scrutinizing the abhorrent working conditions in the Philadelphia tailoring industry (Marot & Pratt, 1901, 1903), Pratt began work at settlement houses. Her first position was part-time, at the College Settlement of Philadelphia in the spring of 1901. Alas, the archival records regarding her work at the settlement house are missing.

After Marot and Pratt moved to New York City in the fall of 1901, and Helen Marot began working as a child labor investigator for the Child Labor Commission, Caroline Pratt began teaching an experimental woodworking method at Hartley House, a Hell’s Kitchen’s social settlement house. *Hartley House News* (1902a) offered a vivid description of her classes:

*With hammer, saw, plane and rule these youthful workers, who average from 8 to 14 years of age were busily occupied in constructing models of various shapes. Around the room could be seen finished bread and sleeve boards, small carts, wheelbarrows, banks, stools, tables, etc.*

Complementing her focus on “the part of the teacher” when she wrote about *Sloyd* (Pratt, 1901, p. 419), Pratt now focused on child development. She developed an appreciation for the necessity of choice, child agency and meaningful work in a child’s education, and criticized manual training in public education.

Pratt’s (1902a) first report on her early settlement house shop work experiment states: “The main feature of the experiment is that the children are allowed to choose their own models” (p. 11). She delivered a list of six positive changes that result from this experiment. The first change was smaller classes. Twelve students are “the limit in size of a class which a teacher can handle effectually” (p. 12). The second change was “less necessity for disciplinary measures, or, perhaps it would be truer to say, that the teacher’s standard of deportment undergoes a change in order that her theories may be consistent” (p. 12). Discipline was left to take care of itself. Pratt believed that since adults do not stand between children and their faults and mistakes, children cannot escape from their mistakes: “it is a constant discipline to them” (p. 12). The third change was the children’s interest in the work: “There is an interest never before experienced; an interest which, with the Settlement boys truly competes with the attraction of the street.” Fourth, she suggested: students made their models for a purpose. They were allowed to take the product home, to use

for purposes they chose. Whatever students made should be “useful to the child and he must have it when he wants it” (p. 12). The fifth change was in line with Pratt’s overall pedagogy of letting students make their own mistakes and learn from them:

*The standards of work must be lowered... To insist upon a boy’s doing a piece of work over is not in accordance with the theory that we learn by our mistakes as well as by our successes. If the boy’s mistakes are destroyed by someone else he doesn’t benefit by them. (p.13)*

The final change concerns “mental activity, a change of greater importance than any other” (p. 13). Since students choose to make their own models, they must plan in advance and be mentally active while working on the model. It is their personal responsibility.

Pratt continued to stress the importance of children’s choice. In the *Fifth Annual Report of Hartley House*, Pratt (1902b) explained that *Sloyd* consisted of “first making the child a producer and afterwards an accurate one, in other words of putting technical skill second” (p. 22). She aspired to go a step further, stating that if a model “is to be truly useful it must be so from the child’s standpoint and therefore that he must choose it” (p. 22). Giving up rigidity altogether, and cooperating with children helps them create their vision, and modifying constructions to fit their abilities was all in strict accordance with the view “that child life is a part of life and not a preparation for life” (p. 23). This view resonated with Dewey’s (1897) position that education is “a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 7). Pratt (1902b) listed the advantages of letting children choose their models: (a) it places the whole responsibility of the work upon them; (b) it trains them in judgment and makes them less satisfied with imitation; (c) children have to develop the habit of thinking carefully before acting; (d) there is a noticeable disciplinary effect of their work; (e) there was not much idling.

Pratt believed that children should become useful members of society as early as possible, “first to his playmates and later to ... adult companions, and later still if all has gone well ... to be useful to society in general” (pp. 22-23). In order to help children to find their interests and abilities, she kept records on how students put their models to work, and how students reported using them. “The keeping of the record of what became of the models contributed towards making the work consciously purposeful” (p. 24), she wrote. By interviewing the students, she found out that the “real fulfilling of the [carpentry] hour was outside the classroom” (p. 24). This child study led her to describe the teacher’s responsibility as follows:

*The training towards doing a thing well is only second to that of doing it cheerfully. The cheerfulness acts as the motive force that carries the individual upwards and toward greater difficulties. The skill of the teacher is employed in arranging the difficulties so that the boy will just meet them*

*without losing his cheer, and in handwork, at least, the resultant must be greater technical ability. (pp. 24-25)*

The students also had a responsibility to the classroom. “It was understood that if [the students] did not wish to work they were promptly to leave” (p. 24). Later, Pratt (1948) wrote in her autobiography that she had only one rule, “work or leave the shop” (p. 20).

Pratt’s students embraced and supported the educational experiment, as did the parents and the Hartley House staff. As reported in *Hartley House News* (1902b), this enthusiasm stemmed from the invitation to students to make wooden items of their own choice that were useful to them, to Hartley House, or at home:

*The Carpentry Classes are progressing very well. There are 9 classes and 78 members on the rolls. The work done in these classes is very attractive. Each boy is set at something different from that of his neighbors. A good many of the members are now working on articles for Christmas. Miss Pratt is in charge of the classes.*

Three years later, *Hartley House News* (1905) again reported on the students’ useful and meaningful work:

*The Carpentering Class is one of the most interesting classes at Hartley House. A visit to it would make any one desire to be a member. Many useful articles are made by its members, both for the House and their own homes.*

Pratt outlined another core objective in teaching shopwork: to initially trim down work to a minimum with the intention of giving the freest possible scope to the “play instinct,” without, however, reducing shopwork to mere play. Pratt explained this idea in her 1905 article, “A Neighborhood Shop for Children” in *Manual Training Magazine*:

*To this end, a low standard of work is permitted in the beginning, and whether the model is a good or a poor one, the child has it when it is finished, thus is used that instinct for ownership which in other forms of school work is shown in collections of various kinds. (p. 159)*

The children’s “instinct for ownership” represents their means to exercise will and intelligence. Around the time children start to want to own things because of what these items can bring them in the way of pleasure, Pratt believed that shopwork would appeal to them, boys and girls alike, if aptly presented. She argued that since children are “more individual than we as adults are” (p. 160), it is important to allow them to choose what they wish to make.

Years later, a Hartley House carpentry student talked about his teacher: “Miss Pratt!... Do I remember her?... She let me make what I wanted to make ... for the first time” (in Benedict, 1942, p. 247). Pratt (1905) brought into play the children’s “love of possession” in concert with their “love of physical activity” (p. 161):

*If we succeed in carrying a child past the point where the tools are a novelty to him, where he comes merely for the pleasure of feeling ownership in them for a brief hour, to the point where he wants the work for itself, we have one with whom it is worth while to spend much time and energy.*

She not only let the children choose a model, but allowed them to choose style and size too. They were not given ready-made drawings. It was up to them to plan the work themselves, to explain their plans, and to make drawings themselves. Pratt’s philosophy was:

*To teach a child to do a thing because the drawing says so is like teaching him to think thus-and-so because the book says so. If it is necessary that he should have a better reason than authority for thinking a certain thing, why should it not be required of him that he have a better reason than authority for acting a certain way? (p. 162)*

In addition, she argued that children must experience the liberty of explaining themselves to adults in order to become aware of their developing unique personas:

*We theorize; the children feel. Our very theories blunt our feelings. We are never sure of them. But in a little child we have something which is all feeling – pure, primitive, direct. Why not use his feelings to test our theories by, especially in those things which concern himself? At any rate, we have nothing better to go by. If the whole plan of nature is purposeful, then each child is here for a purpose.... How shall we ever find this out and be able to give him that help which ought to be ours to give – wisdom – if we always dictate to him instead of allowing him to talk to us? (p. 163)*

In *American Teacher*, Pratt (1913) connected the subject of useful, meaningful work to the students’ self-esteem and unveiled her contemporaneous educational policy aims: the US school system pedagogy desperately needed change:

*If you were to present your boy with a pocket knife and tell him that he could use it for no other purpose than to whittle pudding-sticks for kitchen use, you should not be surprised that he refused the knife – on these terms.... It is quite the same way with tools. The boys look forward to the shopwork in the*

*schools only to find when they get to it that it is not for them after all.... It is again their self-respect that rebels against making pudding-sticks when it is so obvious that the tools should be used for the boys' own purposes. (p. 98)*

Pratt reminded readers that around 1870 when shopwork was introduced in public schools it “was a more or less unconscious recognition of industry as an educational factor” (p. 98). Her initial hope was that besides “dealing with the symbols of things, the children were to be given the opportunity to deal directly with the things themselves” (p. 98). This hope failed to come true since public schools solved problems *before* students tried to solve them themselves, removing the shopwork’s underpinning: usefulness. Teachers in the public school issued and explained working drawings before students were allowed to make them.

In contrast, teachers in social settlements allowed students to choose their projects; to work them out to their own abilities; to explain them to their teacher, using “every method of expression at his command in order to be understood” (p. 99); and lastly, to sketch and refine working drawings before beginning to start the chosen project. Furthermore, informal shopwork stood for the most important features of industry: “the motive, *immediate usefulness* of the object made; the opportunity to grow mentally through solving problems and inventing; the accumulation of certain definite, appreciated facts to be used in future” (p. 98).

In addition, Pratt criticized the systemization of shopwork in the public school system. She (1902a) found that one had to “actively co-operate with children to secure for them the fullest expression in their own natural way.” She believed that it “would occasion a tearing down of traditional theories and practice for which few pedagogues are ready” (p. 14), and condemned the fact that manual training in public schools had already become part of an inflexible system:

*[Manual training] has been systematized almost to death, principally because it admits of systematization as no other subject does, and secondarily, because the teaching of it fell into the hands of men who were essentially mechanical and the law of whose life was system. (p. 14)*

Pratt (1905) explained dissimilarities she observed between shopwork at Hartley House and manual training in public schools, frankly addressing the core of the problem:

*A single circumstance has made it possible for settlement workers to know and understand the needs of the people, and especially of children. That circumstance is that there is no compulsion in operation in connection with their scheme of education. To work at all, they are obliged to know what is wanted. This is not true of the institutions of public instruction. These*



*formulate courses of study, and it is a mere chance if they suit the needs of any considerable number of children. (p. 159)*

## “Theory of Ed.”

Pratt’s critique of the public system and her clarity about the pedagogy of shopwork suggest that from 1896 she was actively developing her own pedagogical theory. The City and Country School Archives hold “Theory of Ed.,” an undated handwritten draft with a list of notes or standpoints. The draft (Pratt, n.d.) stresses that children “must have [materials] which they can work with, can dominate, can have in their power”; teachers should remain “in background,” providing “each child [with] opportunity kept simple”; materials must be used “which promote the purposes of the [child], which serve the present,” allowing children “the freedom of working [with] ingenuity, initiative, imagination”; children “must be allowed to produce something useful & meaningful to themselves”; and, lastly, the “solution of all conduct problems lies in well established work & play habits.”

The draft, perhaps dating from the early 1900s, illustrates Pratt’s distinctive pedagogy. Pratt biographer Mary Hauser (2006) does not believe that Pratt developed a complete pedagogical theory. Another Pratt biographer argues that John Dewey heavily influenced her pedagogy (Semel, 2014). Neither biographer, however, includes the writings reviewed here. In my view Pratt did elaborate a coherent theory. The writings described in this article illustrate that she developed her own unique educational approach. Her texts, forming major theoretical contributions to experimental education, demonstrate a steady progression in independent theorizing based on years of observing children at play and teaching students in shopwork settings. The next section strengthens this argument.

## Pratt’s Theories on Play and Toys

Pratt resigned her settlement job in 1908 (*Hartley House News*, 1908), likely because of her growing involvement with women’s trade unions. When Helen Marot accepted the call to become Secretary of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) in 1906, Pratt also became an active WTUL ally. The women co-organized WTUL support for the largest strike in US history by women working in sweatshops: the 1909 Shirtwaist Makers’ Strike (Staring, 2013a-b). At the same time, Pratt began designing wooden toys, with ambitious plans to manufacture them. The *Kindergarten Review* (1909) and the *Kindergarten-Primary Magazine* (1909) reported that she shared



Figure 4. Advertisement in *The Craftsman* (1909).

prototypes of her playthings with an audience of teachers at the 1909 Annual Meeting of the International Kindergarten Union in Buffalo, New York. The same year, the United States Patent Office filed a trademark request by Pratt. Two years later, the *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office* (1911) affirmed the trademark was registered.

Beginning in 1908 Pratt designed and produced toys (trademarked Do-With Toys) and building blocks (Unit Blocks) aimed to invite children to play, encourage their constructive ability and resourcefulness, stimulate their imaginations, and help them dramatize their experiences. Pratt began by marketing a family of wooden jointed dolls and wheeled farm animals. The *Craftsman* (1909) holds the first advertisement for the dolls (see Figure 4). The *New York Evening Post* (1909) reported that Pratt distinguished three kinds of toys, the first two favored by adults, the third by children: a) toys that do nothing by themselves and are not fun to play with – *Do-Nothings*; b) mechanical toys that do all the playing by themselves after having been wound up – *Look-Ons*; and c) *Do-Withs*, “toys for the do-with children” that “seem to be inviting you to come and play with them” – wooden dolls (men, women and children) and animals (horses, cows, donkeys, sheep, calves, pigs and dogs), houses, stables, carts, and furniture. The article states (emphasis added):

*The toys may be bought one or a few at a time, but each is part of a scheme, and with them all or even with several the child may work out systems of play that will inspire it mentally... In making the toys no effort has been made to “particularize,” as it were, but essential characteristics are emphasized and the rest left to the child’s imagination.*

The *Christian Science Monitor* (1910) reported Do-With Toys came as a father and a mother doll, a boy and a girl doll “with striking resemblance to their parents, and bearing the right relation to them in the matter of stature,” and all kinds of farm animals, a house, including furniture, a barn for the animals, and patterns for clothes. The newspapers stated (emphasis added),

*It is part of the purpose of the “do-with” toys to encourage constructive ability and resourcefulness. The children begin by making clothes for the family, and for this the inventor has provided paper patterns of simple cut and design. Then they will probably want to build houses for them, and after a while they may want more dolls.*

Children would find it a simple matter to create additional dolls themselves, more or less accurately copying the originals. It did not matter if the crafted dolls were lifelike: “It is in their capacity for action that [Pratt] illustrates the world of reality.” The *Christian Science Monitor* (1913) sketched the secrets of the toys’ “capacity for action”:

*The Do-with toys are quaint wooden mortals of many joints, so many that they can be put through almost any motion. They are plainly clad, this farmer and his family, but one recognizes them at once as a family of respectability and sterling worth. They possess a barn which has stalls and a real door to be opened and shut. The farmer can drive into the barn his many-jointed cow and her calf. He can take a bundle of genuine hay from the loft and feed it to the hungry beast. His arms, legs, body, even feet, are capable of being placed in countless positions, and instead of going through his motions by mechanism, it is left to the child to take that form in his own hands and to “dramatize” with his playthings, as the educational phrase goes.*

It was Pratt’s (1914a) view that since modern children are not able to easily gather “play material from the life around them” as children did in pre-industrial times, they do not have “the sort of real experiences of which they see the beginning and end and therefore, to some extent, the meaning” (p. 119). She acknowledged the child Fritz who had inspired her to devise Do-With Toys and blocks especially for him (p. 121). He had “complained about the toys his elders gave him with the remark that ‘All these toys play for me, and I’d like some that play with me’” (Christian Science Monitor, 1910; see also New York Daily Tribune, 1910).

Pratt describes her observations of Fritz, which began in 1908, in her 1948 autobiography. Fritz was the son of a friend, “an inventive and ingenious six-year-old” (p. 23). Whenever Pratt would visit her friend, she used the occasion to study him playing and creating his miniature world: “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, writing the perfect child’s textbook of what he had seen.” In an article in *Woman’s Magazine*, Pratt (1914b) detailed her observations of Fritz playing with playthings and blocks she devised for him:

*Although Fritz was not familiar with what goes on in a country barn, the possession of a horse and cart, a cow and a pig immediately threw him into a play scheme the details of which occupied him for months. The addition of a calf, and later a colt, renewed the old play and added new features. At the vanishing point of the play a man doll was introduced, and again the process began all over. Early in the play it became necessary to have a place to shelter the animals, and later the man had to have a house to live in. For this purpose Fritz had blocks especially made for him, as there were no suitable ones on the market. The block-building the boy did for a purpose was a marvel... In fact, in order to have play “succeed” it is necessary to treat it quite as seriously as work, and in many aspects to apply the self-same rules.*

Advertisements in December 1910 newspapers indicate Do-With Toys were available at New York City's Gimbel Brothers (see Figure 5). The *New York Herald* (1910a) reported, "The Toy designer, who is Miss Caroline Pratt, is only starting on her career and profession. The 'Do-Withs' are still in their infancy, and at present they are all born in Greenwich Village, where Miss Pratt presides over a small workshop." Six photos illustrate the article, showing Pratt producing and painting the toys (see Figure 6). The newspaper noted, "Miss Pratt's toys have approval of many kindergarten experts in this city and elsewhere."

In the winter and spring of 1911, Pratt demonstrated her toys at Child Welfare Exhibitions in New York and Chicago. The *New York Herald* (1910a) wrote:

*Miss Pratt will have charge of the toy shop in the Child Welfare Exhibition, which will be held here in January. The display in her department will include a model toy shop, with work bench and the materials used in making toys. Demonstrations will be given in the shop to show the relation of the one toy to another or the one group to another.*

The *New York Herald* (1910b) also announced Pratt's upcoming toyshop:

*[The] home section of the exhibit is to show a toy shop, not in charge of mere clerks, but actually operated by fascinating toy makers. And before the eyes of the little ones who peer through the low shop window or cluster around the busy toy makers at work on a bench in Toy Street, wonderful treasures are to grow from wood, cloth paper, bits of wire, paste and paints.... From time to time, children will also serve as toy makers.*

Numerous other newspapers and magazines reported the events (e.g., O'Reilly, 1911; Pratt, 1911; *San Francisco Call*, 1911). Consequently, Do-With Toys became well known. For instance, an interview with Pratt in the upstate New York *Whitesville News* (1911) was reprinted in at least nine newspapers in Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin. Pratt explained her pedagogy (emphasis added):

*A 'do with toy' is one that will teach the child how to do things. With it a boy or girl can carry out definite play schemes. It should be simple. It teaches the*



Figure 5. Excerpt from advertisement in *Evening World* (1910).

*child by stimulating its imaginative nature and inventive faculties.... What we are trying to do through our exhibit is to teach parents that their children have a normal play impulse which can be more easily gratified with a few simple toys that tend to inspire the child's imagination and inventive nature than by all the complicated and mechanical toys in the world. Equipped with a few simple toys the boy or girl will learn to make them work for him and do things.*



*Figure 6. Caroline Pratt in New York Herald (1910a).*

Extending her belief that children need “a few simple toys,” Pratt declared that it is not wise to give a child a whole tool chest. Instead it would be prudent to give him first a hammer, and when the child then asks for nails, give him something to pound. By offering tools when the child asks for them, he will learn to use them, make things, and appreciate them. Due to wide press coverage of the exhibits, Pratt and her Do-With Toys achieved a kind of pre-internet instant fame, not only in New York City and Chicago, but also in many parts of the country.

In the autumn of 1911, the Teachers College educational museum housed an exhibition of Christmas gifts, including the Do-With Toys. The event was broadly reported. The *New York Herald* (1911) quoted Pratt:

*“To [fulfill] its full educational obligation,” says Miss Pratt, who has done much settlement work and now revels in producing toys that make one wish one were a boy again, “each toy, within its limitations, should work. Each child through play should unconsciously absorb the useful arts.”*



*Figure 7. New York Child Welfare Exhibit Playshop, in Life and Labor (1911).*

Pratt exhibited her toys on other occasions as well.

Pratt’s toy manufacturing adventure came to an abrupt halt in February 1915, when the New York City Stryvelyne Shop, which had sold the Do-With Toys since 1914, went bankrupt. For a time, the toys were used in Pratt’s Play School and were commended in a book that included working drawings of the dolls (see Marten, 1917), and in some Bureau of Educational Experiments Bulletins (Staring, 2013b). Pratt was awarded the 1919 Mrs. Hubbard Carpenter Award for Toys of Greatest Art and Educational Value at the Art Institute of Chicago, but the toys never regained their popularity. Soon Unit Blocks began to

overshadow Do-With Toys, in both classroom environments and pedagogical importance. Today, Unit Blocks are still at the heart of the City and Country School curriculum, the successor to Pratt’s Play School.

## **Pratt’s Next Dream**

In September 1913, Pratt set up a new pedagogical experiment: the Play School, co-founded by her wealthy friend Edna Smith. They rented an apartment at the corner of Fourth and Twelve Streets, and welcomed eleven four- and five-year olds.

What was the rationale of the Play School, later acknowledged as the first nursery school in the United States (*Daily Boston Globe*, 1929)? Pratt’s (1948) autobiography stresses that social learning was key. It was elicited through children’s play that reproduces the surrounding world and its ways of functioning:

*[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. (p. 27)*

At Hartley House, (between 1901 and 1908), Pratt (1913) had observed that children are not stupid; some are merely “school stupid.” In order to stimulate child agency in play and work, she suggested startling them out of their “school attitude” by giving them emotional stimuli and tempting them to instantly apply knowledge they already possess. This was accomplished by asking them relevant questions, letting them come up with their own thinking and their own answers, while not allowing for a “guessing habit.” She stressed the implications of her pedagogical approach developed over the years:

*Besides better individual training, the great fundamental thing which such work would do for a school is this: It would put it in the position, for the first time, of consciously recognizing that every child has a life of his own; that he has his own interests; that he has his own important social adjustments to make. It would put the child in possession of something with which he could go right out into the world now and solve some of his problems. (p. 100)*

In 1914, Marot, Pratt, and Edna Smith moved into a three-story townhouse, with two floors reserved for the Play School. Marot (1915), in *New Republic*, sketched the aspirations of Play School:

*The school offers each child an opportunity to carry his curiosity about things through experiment to discovery. It is equipped with an apparatus which is not fixed but is constantly extended. This includes work-benches furnished with full-sized tools. Girls as well as boys of four and five years use hammers, saws and planes without dire consequences to tools or fingers... With the help of such tools and by dramatization the children reconstruct the world of adults ... in miniature. Given this opportunity to interpret their environment, an understanding of it becomes for them a very pressing need. It is this condition of the mind that the school sets out to induce. (p. 16)*

## **Pratt’s Continuing Relevance**

During her lifetime, Caroline Pratt’s work was discussed and debated in popular newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals. From the time that she founded the Play School in 1913, her work gained a lasting influence on progressive and mainstream educators. Her Unit Blocks have been in widespread use in early childhood classrooms since the 1920s. Unrecognized in earlier

Pratt biographies (Carlton, 1986; Hauser, 2006; Hirsch, 1978; Semel, 2014) were her theoretical writings from the 1901-1908 Hartley House period and her work on play and toys from 1908 to 1914. It is these previously unrecognized contributions to the field that I have highlighted here.

Between 1896 and 1908, Pratt developed her early progressive pedagogy, expressing an appreciation for the necessity of choice, child agency, and meaningful work. As a result, she criticized the kind of manual training being practiced in public schools. In 1908, Pratt began designing and selling toys and building blocks that demonstrated her theories about play. Her 1911-1914 writings explained that her innovative materials encouraged children's constructive ability and resourcefulness, stimulated their imaginations, and helped them to dramatize their experiences.

Pratt's early progressive pedagogy continues to be relevant. She found a way to address problems of reduced or suppressed motivation to learn, a major quandary in education today. Furthermore, her teaching guidelines supported increasing the self-esteem of her students while giving priority to their sense of agency. She fervently advocated student choice, stressing the usefulness of their work without presenting a "do-as-you-please" pedagogy. Her stance – with choice comes responsibility – is a message for our time.

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## Jeroen Staring

Jeroen Staring has a BA in mathematics, an MSc in anthropology, a master's in special educational needs, and a master's in pedagogy. He teaches mathematics and science at secondary schools in The Netherlands. His 2005 medical sciences dissertation describes the life, work, and technique of F. Matthias Alexander. In 2013 he successfully defended a second dissertation on the early history of the NYC Bureau of Educational Experiments.

