

A Critical Review:

Caroline Pratt's Pedagogical Practice and Contribution in Early Childhood Education

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ECED 420 2021S1-2 History of Early Childhood Education.

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July 4, 2021

## Introduction

“Lost tracks and traces

Buried deep beneath the earth

Revealing secrets

troubled in unruly graves”

~Karen Malone, 2018

The year was 1918, marking the end of the first world war, and the beginning of a deadly world-wide pandemic. In the US, President Woodrow Wilson passed the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in support of women’s suffrage, however it would not be until 1920 that it was ratified; giving women in the United States of America the right to vote, to citizenship and to voice. This was the socio-cultural context of Caroline Pratt --a freethinking, progressive early childhood educator of this time.

In 2020, more than one hundred years later, we are here again. *Living* with another world-wide pandemic; facing escalating tensions of systemic racism, classism, and sexism as it pervades North America. In Canada, as July 1<sup>st</sup> approaches, there are rising debates over whether to celebrate or to stand down --many choosing to observe this day as a way to reckon with Canada’s socio-cultural and political erasures. The colour orange interspersed with the traditional red and white --a gesture of remembrance for the lost and stolen lives of Indigenous Peoples across the land.

Feminist researcher, Lenz Taguchi (2019) writes of the importance of historically situating our academic, educational and research practices. Quoting Annemarie Mol (2008) Taguchi (2019) writes, “situating does not only have to do with where you are, but includes

where you come from and where you want to go” (p. xx). Caroline Pratt’s contributions to feminist post-structuralist practice and scholarship in early childhood education may not be well known, documented or cited, however, this hardly negate her contributions to progressive educational reforms. In fact, much of her thinking can be traced forward, and weaved in the divergent and transversal ‘post’ philosophies and scholarships of today. My intention for this paper, is to give voice to Caroline Pratt, to her pedagogy and practice during an era of exclusionary doctrines and marginalizing practices that functioned to privileged particular bodies, ideas and voices. To question why the philosophies, theories and practices of Euro-western and Anglo men are widely promoted over so many other worthy contributors. Pratt’s pedagogical ideas and practices often confronted status quo thinking, it is her diffractive ideas that I will think alongside, as I lean into particular feminists’ post-structuralist ideas of today.

### **Reckoning with History**

“What does it mean to recognize the many ways that those in power make images of themselves, no matter what is actually standing in front of us?” (Mengiste, 2021).

In a recent lecture, Maaza Mengiste (2021) speaks to the difficulty of “reckon[ing] with the unwieldiness of history’s gaps.... recogniz[ing] that the photographs and documents in archives only lead to other questions and new uncertainties” further asserting, “if we cannot fully know the past... how [can] we imagine the future?” And reckon we must –because humanity and humanization hang in the balance. For Paulo Freire (1970) humankind’s problem was humanization, --or rather *the process of*, “thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression and the violence of the oppressors” (p. 44). And yet Freire writes, the oppressed still yearn for freedom, justice and to regain their humanity. Mengiste and Freire compel us “to recognize the ghosts hovering at the edges” (Mengiste, 2021) of historical moments, movements, and knowledges; to

see the unseeable, and hear the silenced voices, lives, hopes and desires of those who are thwarted, and yet continued to fight for freedom, justice, and humanity. I believe Caroline Pratt was one such ghosts, fighting tirelessly to reimagine a different world for children. Hendry (2008) writes, that “social justice suffused her world” and that she “envisioned a world where educators and reformers would work in tandem to create thinking, responsible adults whose contributions, eventually, would improve society”. The project of education, for Caroline Pratt was to create “a community of little individuals, equals in size and strength and understanding as adults are equals in their own adult communities”. A space where children “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” (p. 5).

#### **A Brief History of Caroline Pratt (1867-1954)**

“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”. ~ Caroline Pratt, 1948

According to historical records, Caroline Pratt grew up on a farm in Fayetteville, New York. A quick google search of Fayetteville, NY describes it as a village of just over 4,0000 inhabitants, and an important “trade and business centre” for the first settlers arriving in 1792. What trade, what business and who these settlers were is implied, as history is written from the default position of the presumed standard of a white Euro-Anglo-centric male. Pratt, like all educators of this time was influenced by the German philosopher, Fredrich Froebel. In particular the Froebelian Kindergarten movement that spread across the new world like wildfire. Froebel’s theories of play; and its positionality in early childhood was to become the subject of much pedagogical thought, study, and practice. However, Caroline Pratt believed that many of

Froebel's theories and practices were out of time and too restrictive; limiting children's capacity to fully engage with/in the world, its materials, artifacts, customs, structures, and systems of society at large. She believed that it was children, through observing and learning alongside them, who were her best teachers. It was upon this premise that Pratt opened her own school in Greenwich Village; naming it the Play School to emphasize the importance, she believed play and its relationship to learning held. This school expanded and was later renamed the City and Country School for children aged 4 to 13 (Staring, 2013).

### **The Rebellion of Caroline Pratt**

From within a limited survey of literature (Hauser, 2006; Hendry, 2008; Staring, 2013) Caroline Pratt was viewed as not only a radical socialist, but also a pragmatic-progressive, feminist thinker and educator, during a period in history when the dividing lines between men and women were clearly drawn. Although Pratt identified as a progressive thinker, she objected to being placed "into a category of progressivism... [and being] associated with any paternalistic doctrine of progressive education that was espoused by John Dewey" (Hauser, 2006, p.79) in particular. Pratt referred to herself as 'radical socialist' not as a feminist, however her ideas aligned with many post-modern feminists working to un-script and/or deconstruct gendered stereotypes, identities, and performative roles rooted in discourses of childhood innocence, purity, and romanticism (Keenan, 2021). As a proponent and advocate for liberation movement, Pratt believed that women should "be free to make their own choices" (Hauser, 2006, p. 79) and she steadfastly refused to be hemmed in by dominant patriarchal discourses.

Perhaps it was due to Pratt's open dissent and resistance of elitism with/in the university/academy; resulting in a backlash of criticism regarding her inability to express in words, a pedagogical philosophy, curriculum, and practice in early childhood education. Pratt

laments, “All my life I have fought against formula. Once you have 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 within it”. Furthermore, Hendry (2008) writes, “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” (p. 1). For her, progressivism was about the social reconstruction of community, and a concern for education as a practice of social justice, toward expanding democracy rather than limiting it. Pratt asserted, “I began to see education not as an end in itself, but as the first step in progress which should continue during a lifetime. The school’s job was to “begin” education not to finish it” (p. 8).

Pratt also worked to disrupt and interrogated the construction of childhood as a separate and sacred space away from the corruption of adult’s worlds. In essence, undoing the 19<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment philosophies of Johan Pestalozzi, Jean-Jacque Rousseau and Froebel, in particular that the purpose/function of education was to create the conditions for children’s inner natures to ‘unfold, grow and progress’ towards an ideal adult subject who could contribute to an industrial world (Aslanian, 2015; Hauser, 2006; Staring, 2013). Malone et. al. (2021) writes that the construction of, “childhood is in a way a performance of modernity: a modern invention to colonise, treat, mould and shape the notion of “childhood” as suits and serves the adults” (p. 3). An invention placing the responsibility of education with/in the realm of the benevolent and charitable work of women. A deeply embedded view that lurks at the core of all those who persist in their dedication to the daily work, care, and governance of children, in the name of a civilized and advanced society.

It is to this feminising of education I now turn, and to the problematization of its origins. Teresa Aslanian (2015) writes, “[a]lthough Froebel idealized the maternal, his call to procure an education for work with young children was initially addressed to men. When he received little interest, he [re]addressed his call to both men and women” . I want to pause here, to emphasise that *Froebel was recruiting men*, and it was in response to *mens disinterest*, that women were ‘hailed’. And as written women “responded with enthusiasm” ( p. 157).

*Enthusiasm!* Starring (2013) writes that, “Teaching was one of few professions accessible to women, especially to young single women” (p. 87). The story I am telling here, is of patriarchy offering women a handout, a benevolent act of goodwill, granting them access into the world of pedagogy, academia, and education. A story of women, such as Caroline Pratt who embraced the call to become a teacher as an entry point into this historically stratified social, cultural and political enterprise.

Caroline Pratt did not quietly abide; she embodied courage, and confidence and stood up to resist and speak out against these deeply embedded Euro-centric and colonialist views. Hauser (2006) writes that it was an “anti-theoretical stance towards ‘book-worshipping universities’... [and] theory-based learning” that Pratt was resisting (p.80). According to Staring (2013) “the ‘experts’ did not tell her anything she could use [which] further intensified her pragmatic thinking about teaching” (p. 5). Caroline Pratt was not content to merely follow, as “a dutiful daughter, carrying out the ideas of John Dewey or other male progressives” she had her own “radical ...unique ideas regarding education ...[and] the development of a more just, humane and egalitarian society” (Hendry, 2008, p. 8).

### **Caroline Pratts Contributions to Feminist, Post-Structural Concerns and Reforms**

***On reconceptualising early childhood education:***

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century discontent was emerging amongst some progressive educators regarding the “subject-centre approach to education” the concern was that it “turned children into beings with no sense of self ... [and] old school methods [were] out of joint with the times” (Starring, 2013, p. 86). Pratt was one such progressive, promoting a different way of schooling and educating children -- not by rote learning --but rather through a living-learning-doing pedagogy. A *child-centred* approach with all the post-modern trappings of free play, and child directed methodologies. Pratt also reappropriated the term ‘experiment’, which at this time was largely associated with laboratory schools and the beginning of the child-study movement. She was a proponent of education as experiential, however, she “rejected the notion of experimenting on children” and of “children as objects of study” (Hendry 2008, p. 13). Instead, she promoted children as co-participants, and co-constructors of knowledge within a complex, evolving and unpredictable world.

***On social justice:***

As a socialist, Caroline Pratt saw education as a project of transforming the biological child into a cultural being, able “to function in the social and cultural life of their community as fully human” (Malone et. al., 2021, p. 36). However, for Pratt it wasn’t just a process of socialization –at the heart of her philosophy, education was a project of social justice. As quoted by Hendry (2008), “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, p. 9). Glenda MacNaughton (2003), in step with Pratt’s ideologies writes, “the point of taking a ‘transforming’ position [within early childhood education] is to consciously set your goals so that they contribute to a more socially just and wise

society –now and in the future” (p. 189). Loris Malaguzzi (1994) promotes the idea of ‘education’ or school, “not [as] the school you are familiar with in the past, but [as] something that you can hope for” (p. 1). Perhaps then, Caroline Pratt was a reconceptualist for her time, an activist and advocate for education as a world making project; and for promoting gender equality, freedom, and experimentation, within a liberatory praxis that imagines other possibilities for a more livable world (Freire, 1970; Keenan, 2021; Malone, 2021; Malaguzzi, 1994).

***On rethinking play:***

Pratt remained skeptical of the passive, idealist, and romantic underpinning of play, she believed that ‘play was not meant to reproduce life but to re-create life in ways that were more democratic’ (Hendry, 2008, p.4). Ailwood (2003), a feminist, post-modern reconceptualist thinker ponders how “play came to be such a dominant pedagogical force in early childhood education” and posits that play too often functions as a means of producing and governing “children and adults in early childhood settings” (p. 287). This is not the function of play that Pratt was promoting. For Pratt play was the “embodiment of democracy” a negotiated space of power, control and relationships wherein children ought to be empowered “to see themselves as active agents in shaping their social world” (Hendry, 2008, p.6). These ideas of play move beyond child-centredness, following the child, or a child lead practice that occupies much of early childhood classroom today, but rather it is “much more driven by social reconstructionist objectives” (Starring, 2013, p.95). And I might suggest, align with the world making project of current early childhood pedagogy that views “educators as collaborators...open to the other, striving to listen without grasping the other making the other into the same” (Moss, 2006, p. 37). It is a pedagogy that works to rethink hierarchal child-educator relationships, and the image of a

passive, anti-intellectual early childhood educator whose role is to simply keep watch over, and entertain children.

### **On co-constructing knowledge, culture, and more just societies:**

For Pratt schooling and education were experiential, “the teacher directs the child to sources of information as well as material so that he [sic] may have the stimulating experience of answering himself [sic] the questions the experience excites. The questions and answers point constantly to new fields and opportunities” (Starring, 2013, p.95). This idea is also promoted as a vision for early childhood education in the BC Early Learning Framework (2018), stating, “educators experiment with environments with the intention of promoting inclusion, building relationships, and provoking more complex thinking” (p. 22). In the words Loris Malaguzzi (1994), “[w]e don’t want to teach children something that they can learn by themselves. We don’t want to give them thoughts that they can come up with by themselves. What we want to do is activate within children the desire and will and great pleasure that comes from being the authors of their own learning” (p. 3). I would add that Caroline Pratt understood that when knowledge and experiences are shared, this creates the conditions for new ideas, thinking, experiments, explorations—and it is in this play space that extraordinary ‘things’ can emerge.

### **Concluding Ideas and Critiques**

Caroline Pratt as feminist thinker, social activist and educator, dedicated her life work to disrupting the deeply embedded essentialized truths and dominant discourses in colonialist and patriarchal regimes. Pratt rebelled against the oppressive systems and structures of governmentality within colonialism and patriarchy that have (and continue to) create ghosts. These ghosts, as unseeable entities persist as regimes Truth, Control and Power –naming, knowing, stating who counts, who is able to be seen, and heard as fully human. Those privileged

few, have offered education words, ideas and knowledge as self-evident, immutable and uncontested truths of children and their childhoods.

Turning now, to the lingering, haunting question of *what if?* What if different voices were heard, different ideas privileged? *What kind of world would it be today, if history did not negate the gaps, ghosts, and erasures?* If the voices of individuals, such as Caroline Pratt were taken seriously, and if her pedagogical practice was acknowledged, cited, promoted and expanded? If education was *already and always* a practice of freedom and emancipation (Freire, 1970)? As I began to research what few historical accounts of Caroline Pratt exist, I return to Mengiste’s (2021) words, and the need for a pedagogical commitment to “reckon with the unwieldiness of history’s gaps”. The gaps are many, and I am left wanting, haunted by the silences, and all the missed opportunities throughout history to create and imagine different worlds. I believe there is tremendous merit in revisiting and combing through the archives –not as mere curios or trivia of days gone by but rather to enliven and provoke deeper thought for today, that might create fractures and openings to create an ethical space to rethink, and to make choices for what we might tuck into our ‘carrier bags’ (Le Guin, 2019) and bring along, and conversely to reconsider what we might consider leaving behind—even if just for now.

**Lingering thoughts:**

“Promises of modernity  
languish in spiralling ecologies

Who were you?

What have you become?”

~Karen Malone, 2021

I can't say for sure, as I can only critique and question based on my own lived experiences, knowledge, and ability (or inability) to think abstractly, divergently and pedagogically. However, this is what it means to be human, to be always and already entangled with and in the world --for this is the process of living, learning, growing, and becoming. As an educational project it is never finished, and never fully knowable as we always pick things up in the midst of a movement, idea or change. However, it is with confidence I conclude that overall, Caroline Pratt contributed meaningful to early childhood education, to children and to their childhoods. As pragmatist, and progressive feminist thinker of this time, Pratt like many women were not taken seriously and had to fight for their voices, ideas and practices to be seen and heard. An all-too-common legacy of many great thinkers and doers- particularly those who are more concerned with humanizing the world as opposed to making a name for themselves within history.

However, Pratt as fully human promoted some less than ideas that are most certainly open to scrutiny. As a teacher, Caroline Pratt was "accused . . . of hating parents, of wishing all children could be born orphans"; and it is written that when Pratt "saw a mother walking down the street that [she] would walk clear around the block to avoid her (1948: 188, as quoted by Staring, 2013, p. 187). The rationale was that Pratt feared parents would interfere with her "freedom of action, [and] try to steer us closer to the more familiar, more comfortable kind of school" (Staring, 2018, p.189). According to Hendry (2008), Pratt placed such a premium on early childhood and child rearing 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, such professional mothers, who have been well trained to raise their children (p. 11). On this, I am opposed and offended to the anti-parent and parenting rhetoric that still

pervades and is echoed too frequently by early childhood educators who presume to 'know better'. This attitude is wholly unacceptable, unproductive, and judgemental. It simply reifies the anti-intellectual sentiment that plagues early childhood educators and early childhood education and is counter intuitive for those of us, who historically yearn for legitimization, validation, and recognition of expert knowledge in this sector. I have to wonder, if perhaps these attitudes say more about the work still to be done, and not so much about any real feelings of contempt for parents in general. In the words of Maaza Mengiste (2021) it is "those invisible threads that connect us to the past, those things we describe in language that is as indefinite and unclear as what we feel in that first moment of encounter; *"I don't know... I'm not sure what to say."* History is written, and history is pictured as an immutable truth and so it is the work of education and pedagogy to blur the edges, and look beyond, to learn to live well with uncertainty and to generate –always-- more questions than answers (Mengiste, 2021).

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