

Teaching to the Whole Child: The Legacy of Caroline Pratt and the Need for Progressive Education

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Abstract

Caroline Pratt was a pioneer of progressive education during a time when children sat in rows of bolted desks, listening to lectures filled with far-away and outdated information. In 1914, Pratt founded The Play School, now known as City and Country School. She merged her expertise working in carpentry with her social and political views to foster a learning environment where children were free to experiment and create. Drawing, painting, and sculpting, along with wood shop, movement, and music, were essential elements of The Play School, with the aim of developing the whole child. Looking at education through a progressive lens, Pratt developed a social studies program that included walks around the neighborhood, frequenting shops, factories, parks, and other workplaces to see and study workers in action as they made their living. For children at City and Country School, there was no set “blueprint” or curriculum in place. Pratt viewed the school as an experiment that involved all members of the community, not just children. Pratt rejected rigid gender roles and expectations in the same way that she rejected certain educational norms. She sought to bring motherhood out of the private sphere where it was devalued, and to reexamine social structures in a way that viewed motherhood as more communal and collective. If we follow Pratt’s lead, we can set the stage for a lively, engaging environment for children that promotes grappling with social realities, creativity, confidence, and a strong moral compass.

Keywords: Progressive Education, Feminism, Play, Activism, Early Childhood Education