Midwives of progressive education: The Bureau of Educational Experiments 1916-1919
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Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 13 Dec 2018
CHAPTER 3
Caroline L. Pratt and The Play School

A school system may be developed only by developing the teachers, and this can be done only, according to our vaunted republican pleas, through the utmost freedom of action. Teaching is an art, and the teacher should be accorded the treatment of her profession until she demonstrates that she is no artist. Then there should be some way of filling her place by some one in whom there lies that possibility. We shall not settle the school problem by cutting down appropriations. By herding in cities we have removed ourselves from the natural educational influences of simple industrial country life — influences which we never recognized as educational until we were deprived of them. The problem of the public school is now as it has ever been to supplement other educational influences. As we have deprived our children of those which are a part of country living, the schools must supply the deficiency and it is for this reason that the scope of the school has been enlarged so as to include “frills and fads.”


In 1913, Caroline L. Pratt founded the Play School, later City and Country School, at New York City, and remained the school’s principal until her retirement in 1945. In 1919 she was a member of the Advisory Council of the Progressive Education Association. Three years earlier, she joined the Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE) in New York City as charter member. How did Pratt, born in 1867 in upstate New York, founder and principal of an experimental school in Manhattan since 1913, come to work with the BEE in 1916?

This chapter outlines Pratt’s story, which is characterized by a number of career switches during a decade and a half long meandering search for self-direction. Following her 1896 rejection of the graded exercises method in woodworking that she trained to teach at a Normal School, she set out to find new direction. After travelling to Sweden to attend a course in Sloyd woodworking instruction, she came to reject all woodwork pedagogy and didactics. Caroline Pratt (1948) remembers her “seven years of teaching in Philadelphia became [as] a period of intense self-education” (p. xiii). Falling in love with a politically active woman led to further search for direction and a series of endeavours as researcher, social settlement reformer, trade unionist, Socialist, author of critical texts, toy manufacturer, and education theoretician. Eventually she would found the school of her political inspired dreams in 1913. This chapter will sketch this development.

It is also an account of when, how, and why Caroline Pratt joined the BEE.

1867-1897: Caroline Pratt, Childhood and Early Career

On 13 May 1867, Caroline (Carrie) Louise Pratt was born in Fayetteville, near Syracuse, in upstate New York. This small village comprised about 1,500 people, 250 homes, five churches, and a Masonic lodge. It is the homestead of the paternal side of her family. The previously rural community had grown prosperous from the Erie Canal related industry. The Canal is situated just outside the village. Caroline grew up and attended primary education and high school. As well as sprawling Victorian era residences, the village housed stores, hotels, taverns, warehouses, quarries, factories, and water mills.
Relationships were face-to-face, the village newspaper reported personal holidays like weddings and anniversaries, including Caroline’s sixth birthday (Carlton, 1986).

Caroline was the third of four children of Henry S. Pratt (1830-1889), and Lydia Celestia Pratt, née Rowley (1840-1917). Both parents were descendents of Puritan era Calvinists. Caroline’s father, former Captain in the Cavalry of the volunteer Union forces, was businessperson, Fayetteville village clerk and he was elected Overseer of the Poor in 1881. His North American ancestors, dating to Thomas Pratt (d. 1692), were soldiers and homesteaders. Lydia’s North American ancestors, dating to John Rowley (d. 1655), were millers and farmers. Caroline’s siblings were her older sister Elizabeth Sophia (Lizzie), older brother John Davis, and younger brother Henry Rowley. John became a clerk in Syracuse. Lizzie studied music at the Syracuse University for a year, taught elementary school in their village from 1880. In 1883, John and Lizzie moved west to Ipswich, South Dakota where John eventually became postmaster. His sister Lizzie assisted him until 1886 when she returned home. Only Henry, who began work at a local flourmill in 1889, married, and had two children. In 1892 Henry moved to Kansas City, Kansas, to work as a bookkeeper.

Social life flourished in Fayetteville. The village had many clubs. Independence Day and New Year’s Day were cheerful occasions, while family visits strengthened feelings of belonging. Family ties were strong. Until her twelfth, Caroline’s life in Fayetteville was uncomplicated. In March 1868 Caroline, Lizzie and John were baptized at the Trinity Episcopal Church of Fayetteville. Their mother was active in the local aid societies. She raised Caroline in a Victorian, religious, traditional and rural yet industrializing community. Caroline learned the manual work of the household when she after school hours became her mother’s responsible little helper. Caroline’s confirmation by Bishop Huntington in January 1883 marked the end of her Victorian girlhood.

Her older brother and sister out of the house left Caroline alone to help her mother. Her father suffered fits of illness (unidentified), becoming dependent upon morphine, his wife, and Caroline — apparently in that order. Caroline suffered illness as well. One biographer believes that she “was threatened with tuberculosis several times in her life” (Carlton, 1986, p. 124). Can malaise and being a sickly child bookworm also explain her later wish to become a kindergarten teacher? It is not an unheard of explanation. Karsten (1986) finds statistical associations between a history of childhood illness, avid reading, and the choice of schoolteacher as a profession.

In the summer of 1884, a great-uncle encouraged her to apply for the position of teacher for the summer session at a school near Pratt’s Falls in the town of Pompey, New York. Pompey, a few miles from Fayetteville, was hometown of the maternal side of her family. Caroline often helped harvest hay on her great-uncle’s farm near Pompey. Acceptance of her application led to Caroline’s first teaching experience. In I Learn From Children (1948), she does not mention her older sister’s teaching career, only that she had not aspired for the position of “teacher of a one-room school...It was my great-uncle Homer’s idea, possibly born of the neighbors’ endorsement, ‘Carrie was always good with children’” (p. xii). She added that she had “none of the benefits of normal school, teacher training, nor even, probably, had ever heard the word pedagogy” (p. 7). Instead of formal training or inspiration from curriculum critics to whom Marietta Johnson attributed her conversion to organic education, Pratt wrote of an inner conviction “that a desire to learn was as natural and inevitable in children as the desire to walk in babies” (ibid.).

In the fall of 1884, Caroline resumed her studies at the village High School. Two years later, she took the Regents’ Advanced Examination. This standardized test
administered by the Board of Regents of the University of New York sought to ensure that those who passed through the entire state had competency and knowledge in algebra, geometry, physics, and political economy. Caroline passed the exams; but, for the first year, she continued to help her parents. The following year, due to their father’s prolonged illness, Caroline and Lizzie had to contribute to the household finances. Lizzie began work at the local post office. In September 1887, Caroline’s results on her 1886 examination secured her an appointment as assistant teacher in the Primary Department of the local Union Free School. As with Marietta Johnson, during the 1880s, teaching was one of few professions accessible to women, especially to young single women.\textsuperscript{143} Caroline taught the three R’s, manners, and elocution. She loved to end the day’s strict teaching program with some frivolity. “[When] the children and I were thoroughly weary of the three R’s, I varied the program by teaching the little boys to tip their hats to a woman” (p. xii).

Her father committed suicide only a few days before her twenty-second birthday. A burden lifted! After years of tending to her long-suffering father’s pain and physical deterioration (and her own possible tuberculosis), Caroline suddenly became socially and physically active. First, she kept teaching. Following Lizzie’s move to Three Rivers, Michigan, in 1891 (where Lizzie taught music in a public school), the formerly sickly Caroline even became President of the Lawn Tennis Club. Most of all, she began thinking about a career: “Because I had always been interested in young children, the career of a Kindergartner seemed most appealing to me” (p. 14).

In 1892, she obtained a scholarship through the intervention of a neighbour who had spoken to the Dean of the College for the Training of Teachers in Greenwich Village, New York City.\textsuperscript{144} Caroline began her classes in the College two-year professional diploma course in kindergarten methods and manual training.\textsuperscript{145} When she began her studies, the College, renamed Teachers College in that same year, schooled teachers of children of the poor. She soon became troubled by doubts: “The more I learned of the newest Kindergarten methods of the day, the more uncertain I became” (\textit{ibid.}). Pratt specialized in manual training, based on graded exercises principles. She complained, “Your curriculum was a series of exercises, graded from easy to difficult. Your pupils had to master one skill after another” (pp. 15-16). The curriculum was “all in the abstract…but never by the slightest taint practical!” (p. 16).

Immediately after receiving her diploma in 1894, Pratt moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she taught woodworking in the Philadelphia Normal School for Girls until 1901.\textsuperscript{146} She was successful, but not happily. “Naturally, I used the system I had been taught — I knew no other — but I taught with the depressing conviction that I was helping to perpetuate a system which had no real educational value” (\textit{ibid.}). From a \textit{School Journal} (1895) article describing Pratt’s actual teaching practice, we learn that she indeed taught graded exercises.\textsuperscript{147} The class in woodworking — accommodated in a well-lit room, with three rows of workbenches for two students each, in the basement of the school with capacity for forty girls — had been established in 1892. The prospecting female teachers would become special educators, “able to correlate and co-ordinate the woodworking with the language, arithmetic, and other work of the school” (p. 475).

1896-1901: Finding Direction in Life

As time advanced, Pratt concluded the established graded exercises method to be unsound. This led her to search for alternatives, “for something I could do to make my work in the Normal School worthwhile for my students” (Pratt, 1948, p. 17). In 1896, she crossed the Atlantic Ocean for a six weeks summer course in the Sloyd woodworking
instruction at Nääs, Sweden.\textsuperscript{148} However, five years later, in March 1901, Pratt (1901) in a report about her trip to Sweden in \textit{Education}, after describing the natural surroundings and atmosphere of Nääs,\textsuperscript{149} declared: “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. 418). She was of opinion that \textit{sloyd} teachers, because of the extreme systematisation of the method, would obtain nothing out from their work. They would be little less than machines, identical to their students. “The danger for sloyd lies in the fact that as a system it is considered permanent, and no system was ever that” (p. 420).\textsuperscript{150} She would later characterise her trip to Sweden as disappointing. “I had only a lame answer to my question” (Pratt, 1948, p. 17).

In 1897, Pratt began attending special courses for teachers at the University of Pennsylvania and in 1899 she met Charles Hanford Henderson, director of the Pratt Institute High School in Brooklyn, New York City.\textsuperscript{151} Henderson’s October-December 1899 lectures about Organic Education at the Griffith Hall encouraged Pratt, motivating further study of alternative, progressive approaches to education.

In \textit{Chapter 2} we saw how Marietta Johnson attributed her conversion experience to progressive education methods to her reading of Oppenheim (1898), Patrick (1899), and Henderson (1902). Pratt did find supportive agreement with Henderson. However, after Pratt herself, the person who most inspired her, and kept on inspiring her for decades to come, was Helen Marot (1866-1940). Helen was the younger sister of Mary Marot, founding mother of the Visiting Teacher program (see \textit{Chapter 1}). In 1897, Helen, a graduate of the class of 1895 of the Philadelphia Drexel Institute Library School (\textit{Library Journal}, 1895), took a position as librarian at the Philadelphia Free Library of Economics and Political Science, which immediately became a meeting place for liberal and radical minded Philadelphians.\textsuperscript{152} Over the years Marot — “The only clear socialist product of Philadelphia Quakerism” (Benjamin, 1976, p. 163)\textsuperscript{153} — and Pratt immersed themselves in the literature of labour, social reform, especially about the social settlement movement, social relationships, and education. In Pratt’s (1948) own words, “I did some other…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 a profound concern for human values” (p. 18).

Reading and being together revealed their amorous feelings for each other. Marot and Pratt were in love — in a homophobic world, precluding being open about their sexuality. Throughout their life-long companionship, they became strong-minded feminists, mutually influencing each other in subsequent endeavours as social and educational reformers, trade unionists, Socialists, and political activists.\textsuperscript{154} Pratt’s fundamental political self-education reached its first peak from 1899 to 1901. She and Marot jointly engaged in literature and participant observant research for the United States Industrial Commission on Immigration, investigating working and living conditions in the custom tailoring industry in Philadelphia and surrounding countryside. It was “a bitter eye-opener,” Pratt (1948) exclaimed in her autobiography (p. 19). “The work was done in the home, with no limit to the hours the people worked, and no check on working conditions — which were also living conditions, and which from both points of view were appalling” (\textit{ibid.}). In 1901, she and Marot wrote a solid report referring to the ready-made clothing industry, unfolding their joint investigation (Marot & Pratt, 1901). Two years later, Marot and Pratt (1903) also issued a report referring to custom-made clothes.\textsuperscript{155}

The investigation transformed Marot “into an aggressive, partisan activist” (Adickes, 1997, p. 56); it transformed her “from a studious librarian of pacifist tendency into a belligerent activist” (Cohen, 1971, p. 499). We can draw parallel conclusions
regarding Pratt’s political state of mind. What applies to Marot, applies to Pratt, and vice versa. They were becoming dauntless and valiant activists, tremendously committed to their causes. First and foremost, they incited compassion for the workers whose living conditions they had researched. For instance, the *Church Standard* (1901a) announced that on April 15, 1901, Marot and Pratt would address the Christian Social Union’s meeting at St. Luke’s Parish House on the harms of sweatshops. A week later, the *Church Standard* (1901b) report on the Marot-Pratt presentation noted:

[It] was a cool, plain statement of horrible facts, all the more pathetic for not being at all sentimental or gushing. It told of hours of work practically unlimited save by the time fixed for the delivery of goods, and of nauseous and unsanitary conditions which it required brave devotion to a principle to invade day after day. As an example Miss Pratt spoke of the discovery of a vest, ordered for a well-known United States Senator, which was being made in an exceedingly dirty place, the contracts for this sort of work being mostly given out by fashionable establishments that sneer at labor unions as anarchistic or socialistic. (p. 877).

In the winter of 1901, Pratt — who taught part-time at the Normal School for Girls until June 1901 (Willard, 1901) — began working for the College Settlement of Philadelphia, 431 and 433 Christian Street. There are no surviving records or extant reports regarding her work or the nature of her work at Philadelphia’s College Settlement.

**From Philadelphia to New York City, and Pratt’s Political Stance**

The Marot-Pratt couple moved to New York City in the fall of 1901. Helen Marot made a meandering career. In New York City she began working as an investigator of child labor conditions for the Child Labor Committee of the Association of Neighborhood Workers. Marot (1903) publicly accounted the outcome of her work in her report “The Child Labor Movement in New York.” Mary Simkhovitch (1904) of the Association of Neighborhood Workers proudly listed the results of the “Enforcement of the Child Labor Laws in New York,” instigated by Marot. She wrote, “The child labor law applies now to factories, stores and offices, and to the messenger and delivery service. The requirements for beginning work are threefold: 1. A minimum age, 14 years. … 2. A minimum amount of education — about equivalent to what a normal 12-year-old child has received. … 3. A previous compliance with the school law, i.e., statement from principal that child has been attending school regularly” (p. 23). For the Alliance Employment Bureau, Marot investigated charity worker salaries. From 1904 until mid-1905, she served as Secretary to the Pennsylvania Child Labor Committee while residing in Philadelphia. Scott Nearing was her assistant; he replaced her as Secretary in 1905. By the end of 1905, back in New York City, she worked with the School Visiting Committee of the Public Education Association of New York City and also assisted Florence Kelley, Secretary of the National Consumers’ League, investigating literature for a court case concerning working hours of female workers (Muller vs. Oregon). From 1906 to 1913, she was Secretary to the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) of New York City, founded in 1903. She became an extremely professional, effective organizer, speaker, and negotiator.

After moving to New York City in 1901, Caroline Pratt began teaching an exploratory manual training method in a private school and at Hartley House — reviewed in *Chapter 1*. During these years, from the fall of 1901 until the fall of 1908, Pratt not only educated her students but educated herself too, through taking a correspondence course from the University of Chicago and through taking courses
offered at settlement houses. Without doubt she learned from her colleagues at Hartley House and at the private school. On the other hand she gave talks to colleagues herself.\textsuperscript{163} Above and beyond, she expressed her political opinion publicly. For instance, as regards to educational matters, she sent a letter to the editor of the \textit{Evening Post} and had an article published in the 1906 \textit{Charities and The Commons}.

In April 1905, the \textit{Evening Post} (1905) had “Not Only The Three R’s,” a statement by the Principals’ Club, defending and upholding the contemporary course of study in the New York City public schools in preference to a course more strictly devoted to the so-called three R’s. The Principals’ Club’s conclusion was, “We believe that the three R’s are essentials, but if taught alone they make a most impracticable system of instruction, utterly inadequate to the requirements of the life the child is to enter.” Pratt’s (1905a) letter to the editor in the \textit{Evening Post} constitutes her analysis of the situation;\textsuperscript{164} an excerpt opens this chapter — see above epigram.\textsuperscript{165}

In 1906, in an address before the NYC Association of Neighborhood Workers, Robert Woods of the South End House in Boston lambasted the public schools’ failure to adequately prepare pupils for their future industrial work (\textit{Charities and The Commons}, 1906a-b). Pratt (1906) responded that the labour market, flooded with inadequately schooled clerks, “with the result of long hours and poor pay” (p. 702), represented an educational and an economic problem. She argued that a movement for trade schools would lead to insufficiently trained workers and similar results for clerical occupations.\textsuperscript{166} Since students no longer live in simple conditions, but are impacted by all manner of social and economic change, schools “must supply the deficiencies of home and street” (p. 703). Serving as social institutions, schools must educate students on social levels as well. This change in perspective of schooling needs capable teachers, who are militant social reformers as well as educators.

What did Pratt learn from her carpentry lessons? What did she learn from her companion Helen Marot? What did she learn from friends like Mary Marot, Harriet Johnson, Harriet Forbes, and their settlement colleagues? The memorandum is unambiguous. Pratt saw herself not merely as a social settlement teacher, but as a social reformer. She was becoming a capable educator, social reformer, indeed, a fighter for social justice. This stance took a long road to realize.

\textbf{1909-1910: The WTUL, Zealous Unionists and the Uprising of the Twenty Thousand}

In her anti-communist screed, \textit{The Red Network}, Dilling (1934) lists Caroline Pratt among members of the Special Committee of the Emergency Committee for Strikers Relief (pp. 146, 314). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Norman Thomas, Socialist Party candidate for President, organized that committee in 1926 to assist strikers in the textile industry. Dilling appears unaware of Pratt and Marot’s investigation of the Philadelphia custom tailoring industry between 1899 and 1901, and of their WTUL support for the shirtwaist strike of 1909.\textsuperscript{167} In contrast, in biographical notes on Pratt in \textit{Teachers College Record}, a historian of education only mentions her union support in passing as “aiming at the amelioration of the sweatshop conditions rife in the ladies’ garment industry” (Beck, 1958. p. 129). Other Pratt biographers, including Carlton (1986), Hauser (2002, 2006), Hirsch (1978), and Semel (1999b), following Pratt (1948), also only briefly touch on her intense, passionate, political, labour, and feminist activism.

Recent feminist and gay histories begin to restore the omission. In a monograph on the WTUL, Dye (1980) calls attention to exceptionally close relationships that WTUL female allies formed with each other from 1903 to 1913.\textsuperscript{168} She observes that during the first decade of the league’s existence WTUL allies shared a number of
characteristics: Almost everyone was female; they were, without exception, wealthy, single, and unusually well educated. Prior to their work for the WTUL, many had worked for a charitable organization. Frequently, when social conditions did not respond to social reform, they became disillusioned with traditional charity work, and, often, work at a settlement house led to activism. Marot, for instance, began attending WTUL meetings before 1906 (p. 39). Likely Pratt, who worked at the Hartley House settlement at the time, attended too.

In a 1907 letter to a WTUL founding member, Marot wrote of “looking forward to a revolution in New York among working women” (in Dye, 1980, p. 87). She became the league’s Secretary in the spring of 1906. Her activities between 1906 and the fall of 1909 mainly consisted of providing support for unionizing women workers. Among other WTUL allies, Marot and Pratt led classes for unorganized women in feminism, union principles, and union activities such as leading meetings and strikes. Thus, in their background rolls, they lent assistance to the working women in establishing unions among tobacco workers, laundresses, telegraphers, seamstresses, among other trades (New York Times, 1907b).

Marot (1910) wrote of an eleven-year struggle of to organize needle industry shops individually that had failed (p. 119). While it was a single industry, there were numerous small shops; in 1900, the total was 1,224 (Sachar, 1992). During July, August and September 1909, Marot and other WTUL allies held spontaneous street meetings outside the shops, handing out circulars in English, Italian and Yiddish. At the Second Biennial Convention of The National Women’s Trade Union League of America, held in Chicago at the end of September 1909, Marot told that she immensely enjoyed these meetings. “It is helpful in time of strike to hold street meetings…it gives tremendous courage to the union girls to have us talk there” (NWTUL, 1909, p. 20). Then, in November 1909, perhaps the largest strike of women workers in the history of American labour movement began. The New York City shirtwaist makers’ strike originated in response to a firing of workers who attempted to organize a union at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, known for particularly draconian sweatshop conditions, and in response to brutality of hirelings. A 1910 investigation of the New York City and Philadelphia shirtwaist trade shows “long hours, a great deal of overtime work, sharp fluctuations in wages owing to the seasonal character of the work and the shifting price scales, and a complete lack of any standards as to wages or methods of business among the manufacturers” (Goodman & Ueland, 1910, p. 827).

On 22 November, inspired by a speech by the fiery Clara Lemlich at an emergency meeting of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in the Cooper Union auditorium seating 3,000 predominantly female workers, a resolution for a strike was taken. What began as a walk out at a single shop (not Triangle) soon spread, becoming a general strike among some 500 of the small to large shirtwaist factories in the garment district. As well as higher wages and shorter working hours, strikers fought for the right to organize (Leupp, 1909; Sumner 1910). Reflecting the ethnic characteristics of the workforce, Lemlich’s spontaneous speech was in Yiddish; she was a young woman immigrant from the Ukraine, and a member of the ILGWU.

The Survey noted, “Several weeks before this eventful night [November 22; J.S.], the arresting of pickets had begun, and members of the Women’s Trade Union League had begun to take a hand” (Leupp, 1909, p. 385). It is not known who had asked the WTUL for support. Active WTUL allies “walked the picket lines, paid calls on strikebreakers, and occasionally took positions as strikebreakers themselves to agitate inside the shop. Others organized consumer boycotts, street meetings, publicity campaigns, and fund-raising benefits...Wealthy allies posted bail for arrested strikers, and
league attorneys provided counsel. The WTUL also helped organize walkouts” (Dye, 1980, p. 68). In addition, allies made financial contributions to strike support (posting bail, providing strike pay) (New York Times, 1909b). Helen Marot (1910) described the crucial change in media perception that occurred when middle and upper class women supporters began to be arrested for strike support activities. The Survey reported, “The [strikers] are showing an unusual pluck and unity of spirit. It is a unique spectacle anywhere to see Jews, Italians and Americans working shoulder to shoulder for a common cause” (Leupp, 1909, p. 385). This signifies an important aspect of the shirtwaist makers’ strike and of parallel strikes. The strikes brought together women and men of nearly every ethnic group to fight for a common goal. It formed part and parcel of their process of Americanization.

Factory owners even employed prostitutes to replace strikers in an attempt to break a strike that would last for more than two months, involving about 30,000 garment workers.172 Helen Marot directed the WTUL strike support;173 contemporaneous reports found her dedicated work crucial (Mailly, 1910). Contemporaneous (e.g., Dorr, 1910) and recent accounts such as Faderman’s (2000) To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America agree that Marot “raised sympathy for the strikers in women’s groups such as the Colony Club [and] succeeded in convincing the Colony Club to pledge both money and influence on behalf of the strikers” (p. 107). “Marot was supported in this endeavor by several Club members who were affluent descendants of American colonists,” some of whom were openly lesbian (ibid.) 174 Caroline Pratt served on the league’s WTUL Finance Committee, which raised $15,000 for the strike fund (New York Times, 1910b). Others raised funds as well; French researcher of the uprising Françoise Basch (1990) mentions the Socialist Party, the Knickerbocker Company, the Federation of Manhattan Musicians Union and Vassar College.

Pratt, like Marot, must have worked relentlessly. Marot and Pratt’s social and personal life at the time centered wholly on the strike. For example, on the eve of the uprising and on the actual day of the launch of the strike, the 19 October and 22 November editions of the New York Call announced meetings at the rooms of Misses Marot and Pratt at 218 West Fourth Street.175 Some historians observe that it has “taken over 65 years for historians to reacknowledge what the community knew all along” (Schulman, 1994. p. 136); that is, regarding support activities for the waistmakers’ strike “lesbians were at the centre of radical organizing on the East Side, and that their relationships influenced radical politics and strategy” (ibid.). Other historians observe that within “the relative safety of this homosocial world the women endeavoured to instruct the workers in sisterhood, the power of collective action, and the history of labor movement of which they were so vital a part” (Aptheker, 1989, pp. 86-87), or add, uncritically, “These activist middle- and upper-class women saw their role as ‘big sisters’ to laboring women, who were virtually friendless” (Faderman, 2000, p. 105). That they assumed a big sister role was not necessarily an act of condescension, as Progressive Era critics have argued.176 Dye (1980) asserts that the WTUL allies’ construct of sisterhood reveals how the “ideal of sisterhood always coexisted uneasily with the ideal of class solidarity” (p. 59). She argues that for understanding women’s status, gender cuts across lines of class and ethnicity.

So, adding to Pratt scholarship, recent scholarship, often self-identified as feminist and gay history, permits concluding that a group of WTUL women — some of whom were lesbian — were deeply involved in union activities and led support activities of this major strike of mostly women workers. Included were Helen Marot, Caroline Pratt, Harriet Forbes and her lesbian companion Harriet Johnson. Also included were Mary Marot, Edna Louise Smith,177 and Evelyn Dewey, who were not identified as lesbian,
suggesting a degree of tolerance for differences within the WTUL — and that sexual preference had less bearing on actions than other social factors. Being openly identified as lesbian was certainly not a bar to leadership position within the WTUL.

Successive annual reports of the WTUL reveal that Forbes, Johnson, Helen Marot, and Mary Marot annually swapped chairs as members of the league’s standing committees: Education Committee 1909-1910: Forbes, Johnson and Mary Marot; Education Committee 1910-1911: Forbes, Johnson, Helen Marot and Mary Marot; Italian Committee 1911-1912: Forbes and Helen Marot. As well, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (1910) listed the 1910 WTUL officers included Helen Marot (Secretary); Caroline Pratt (Finance Committee); Harriet Forbes (House Committee) and Mary Marot and Harriet Johnson (Education Committee).

Most women in the larger group of WTUL allies were volunteer pickets in the 1909-1910 shirtwaist strike. This meant withstanding freezing temperatures and police beatings while on the picket line (Foner, 1979). Adversaries called them “uptown scum,” others called them “college girls.” In an open letter to Commissioner Baker of the New York City Police (The Sun, 1909a), Helen Marot protested that when on her picket duty in the neighbourhood of Washington Square, a “plain clothes officer” threatened “You uptown scum, keep out of this, or you’ll find yourselves in jail.”179 The New York Times (1909a) ran a page-long story on the “college girl” pickets. “They are college graduates, most of them, suffragists some of them, all of them with independent incomes, some of them with millions.” The article ends with a list of thirty-seven volunteer pickets, including “Miss Carolin [sic] Pratt, Miss Harriet Forbes, Miss Harriet Johnson,…Mrs. Rose Pastor Stokes.”180

Close friendships formed among WTUL allies. “In their friendships and living arrangements many WTUL women lived their ideal of sorority by establishing their closest emotional ties with other women” (Dye, 1980, p. 56). For a majority of WTUL allies, the league became a “full-time commitment, a way of life” (p. 57) in which league members formed a feminist compassionate friendship network, encouraging each other in their union and personal life. A number of the relationships endured, specifically “Helen Marot lived all her adult life with Caroline Pratt” (ibid.). Dye appears aware of only part of their domestic unit. The 1910 United States Federal Census reveals that Harriet Forbes, Harriet Johnson, Caroline Pratt, Helen Marot, and a fifth woman, Emma James, were household members at 218 West Fourth Street. Forbes was head of the household; Johnson, Marot and Pratt were her partners, while James was servant in the house. The first four women had been passionate WTUL allies. Seigfried (1996) observes, “We can only guess what images ‘homelike’ evoked for [open; J.S.] lesbians like Harriet Johnson and Harriet Forbes [and barely closeted lesbians like Helen Marot and Caroline Pratt; J.S.], who set up housekeeping in a homophobic world” (p. 103). All four had worked at Hartley House; Forbes and Johnson, with Helen Marot’s sister Mary, were visiting teachers with the Public Education Association since 1909.181

These strong women organized and orchestrated strike support. While educating working women in sisterhood, they encouraged trade union membership and radical politics. The alliance of progressive suffragettes of the WTUL with militant union organizers in the International Ladies’ Garment Union’ Workers (ILGUW) may have been instrumental in quickly bringing a victorious ending to the shirtwaist strike — the most influential strike of the era, not just of women workers. Forbes, Johnson, Marot, and Pratt stood their ground in the very eye of this labour movement hurricane. The victory belonged to the ILGUW strikers and their families. The middle class volunteers made a difference too. They proved to be valuable organizers and negotiators who effectively used media to promote the workers’ cause. Plus, they took on the
responsibility of financial strike support, which was substantial. Pratt and three of her four housemates truly had emerged as militant, tenacious fighters. The experience must have inspired hope and considerable self-confidence.

1911-1913: Following the Uprising of the 20,000: The Usual Feminist Activities

Only after the February 1910 waistmakers’ settlement were Marot and Pratt free to attend to other concerns. Marot returned to her usual WTUL Secretary duties, such as recruiting marchers for the 1910 Labor Day Parade (New York Times, 1910c). Together with two co-WTUL-incorporators she worked hard to receive incorporation papers of what became known as the Women’s Strike Council (Evening World, 1910; H. Marot, 1911a). Marot was Guest Editor of “The Economic Position of Women,” that is, the very first issue of the Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York. Her own report “A Woman’s Strike — An Appreciation of the Shirtwaist Makers of New York” (H. Marot, 1910a) in the Proceedings praises the courageous women who withstood the bitter cold, police brutality, factory owners’ inflexibility and obstinacy — claiming victory in the end.182

Even so, the settlement was of mixed results. It was a victory in that the companies recognized the union (The Survey, 1910). However, workers won only incremental improvement in wages and working conditions. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in March 1911, killing 146 garment workers, is a tragic testament to the strikers’ failure to win more than marginal gains. True enough, Helen Marot had already warned in a chillingly prophetic way in December 1910: “The conditions in the shops at present make it unsafe for people who work there. Our brothers and sisters may be burned any time a fire breaks out” (in New York Call, 1910b).

In 1913, the WTUL began emphasising feminism over trade unionism, according to some adherents. Helen Marot and other unionists found the league’s limiting of advocacy for protective legislation for workingwomen and women’s suffrage to be alienating and disillusioning. She resigned her position as Secretary of the league in the spring of 1913, not long after the New Jersey Paterson Silk Strike began.183 A March 1915 New York Tribune (1915c) interview illustrates that she had not lost a bit of unionist’s zeal, passionately defending her view that working women are indifferent to, even suspicious of, equal suffrage, stating that the “woman movement” is essentially a “middle class woman’s movement.” Her comments led to a vehement reaction from her former WTUL sisters, who were quoted in a New York Tribune article taking exception to Marot’s position that the “working woman feels the need of direct action” and “feels her union is nearer to her than suffrage” (Gruening, 1915).184

Pratt remained politically active too, although her activism never seemed as intense as Marot’s. In 1908 and 1909, she served on the WTUL Finance Committee; in 1910 she was elected Chair of the committee. She remained Chair until 1913, when she, like Marot resigned her WTUL position. Until 1913, she made political and feminist contributions to New York Call, the local Socialist newspaper. A New York Call letter to the editor lambasts Mrs. Prestonia Mann Martin, author of Is Mankind Advancing? (1910). Martin had promoted eugenic and anti-suffragist views during a Hudson Theatre lecture titled “Women’s Best Service to the State from the Anti-Suffrage Point of View” (Evening Post, 1911c). Pratt (1911b) caustically argued, “Mrs. Martin’s position as an anti-suffragist is clear. She has, by virtue of her ability to put wuzziness on a scientific basis, become a great leader. That she will assume the responsibility of that leadership is not to be expected.” Pratt evidently maintained feminist advocacy. Fayetteville Bulletin (1912), published in her birth-town, reported that “Miss Caroline Pratt gave an interesting talk
on Equal Suffrage before the Philomath Society” during a visit to Fayetteville in June 1912.

**Pratt’s Critique of the Early Twentieth-Century Educational System**

“Pratt would have bridled at being called a ‘reformer,’ for she identified herself firmly as a revolutionary Socialist” (Antler, 1987, p. 241). We have already noticed that Pratt (1906) was unambiguous about her political ambition and the failure of public schools to prepare pupils for their future industrial work. Early in her career, she envisioned herself becoming a capable educator, a settlement house reformer, and a political warrior. Her ideal was to battle for reforms, an ideal she reached by the time the shirtwaist strike of 1909 came to a favourable conclusion. There exists graphic evidence that she would battle again for reform whenever she thought it necessary. The *New York Herald* (1912), for instance, explicitly mentions her name as a helper of her suffragist sisters in a bitter row at the 1912 Women’s Industrial Exhibition at the New Grand Central Palace.

Her name appears in the 1912 Socialist Party rolls as party member and elected member of its Standing Committee on Education. Participating in the party’s education committee gave opportunity to express her increasingly adamant views on school organization and administration. Reporting for the party’s *New York Call* on the Third Annual Conference on the Problems of the Exceptional Child, she noted that a discussion question — “Why not reduce the numbers in the classes at once and give every child that individual attention which each needs?” — brought approving applause (Pratt, 1912a). Indeed, she reported that a majority of conference papers expressed the child-centered truism that “the school should be made to fit the individual child” recognizing “the impossibility of making the child fit the school.” Pratt argued that education scientists and school managers would need enormous funds to realize those goals. “To no one except a Socialist could the situation present a hopeful aspect…It is a mad fact that in the profit-seeking world we have built, there is no place and no chance for the children, because there is no profit to be made from them…Only a Socialist government will be able to free sufficient funds for a purpose which is not profitable to private enterprise.”

Problems of medical inspection were numerous; they were only able to make available four minutes per child per year. “Idiots and uneducable children,” the “greatest source of sex menace [and] other degenerating influences,” had no means for special education. Regarding overcrowding: “No teacher can handle such classes as we have with any degree of efficiency. They are an absurdity.” Reflecting deeply felt unionist views, she added, “They correspond to the sweatshops of industry.”

Early in 1913 Pratt was among the signers of a call to form the Teachers’ League of New York (see Chapter 1). A general meeting of teachers who desired to join was held in February 1913, in Milbank Chapel, Teachers College. Mary Marot and Caroline Pratt were among its co-founders. Later that year, in “Tools vs. Rules” in *The American Teacher* (the organ of the league) Pratt broached a subject she had not touched for years: teaching manual training in public schools (Pratt, 1913). This rendering is a more focused, far more theoretical version of her 1902 critiques “Carpentry at Hartley House” and “Carpentry Classes” and her 1905 “A Neighborhood Shop for Children” (see Chapter 1). She continued to argue that the whole school system was in need of change, but now, to present her case, she offered the example of how children play freely with tools in informal settings in opposition to the constraints of manual training shop work as taught in the public schools. She began with an illustration (p. 98):
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.

She reminded her readers that when shop work was introduced in the public schools, around 1870, it “was a more or less unconscious recognition of industry as an educational factor” (ibid.). Besides “dealing with the symbols of things, the children were to be given the opportunity to deal directly with the things themselves” (ibid.). This approach failed, first because public schools had in fact solved any problems before the students could even try to solve them themselves. Second, the public schools had removed shop work’s underpinning — usefulness.

Pratt illustrated the first basis of failure by outlining how formal teachers in public schools issued and explained the working drawings of models before allowing students to make them. Informal teachers, in contrast, would encourage students to choose their own project; to work it out to their own abilities; to explain it to their teacher, using “every method of expression at his command in order to be understood” (p. 99), and lastly, and most notably, to sketch and refine time and again their own working drawings before beginning to start the chosen projects. She illustrated the second basis of failure by showing that informal shop work, as taught in settlement classes, represents the most important features of industry, that is, “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).

Pratt’s new vision: “If it were possible to introduce such work into a public school, the shop might serve as a clearing house for the whole school” (p. 99). She explained that students’ apparent poor understanding of their own language and practical arithmetic is not that children are “stupid;” they may seem to be, but are instead “school stupid,” merely “asleep” (p. 100). She proposed startling students out of their school attitude during shop work, to make them think, with emotional stimuli. This would encourage them to apply on-the-spot knowledge they already possess — through asking relevant questions, letting the children come up with their own thinking and their own answers, not allowing for children’s guessing habit. The students would thus better understand the meaning of (English) words and phrases. They would actually use the arithmetic knowledge they already possessed. According to Pratt, this would put the schools in a position “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” (ibid.).

She defined the aim of education in general as “to put an individual in a position to better adjust his relationships” (ibid.). Although schools recognize the aim, she argued that they fail to realize that it is the actual process of adjusting that counts. The “process of adjusting” represents the school’s real socializing process. Manual training shop work is essential, but important in most schools. “The children can only become educated by being useful to their several groups now, to learn to adjust their relationships by adjusting them. The simplest, most obvious point of attack for the introduction of this fundamental idea is thru the shop work” (p. 101).

The theoretical insights in the September 1913 American Teacher article appeared in chorus with the opening of Play School. Before outlining the events that led to founding the school, another aspect of Pratt’s life affecting her pedagogy needs our attention.
1908-1910: The Birth of Do-With Dolls and Toys

Caroline Pratt explored another career option during her WTUL and political advocacy. At some time in 1908, not long before she resigned teaching carpentry at the Hartley House, she began designing wooden blocks and jointed dolls and toys, developing entrepreneurial plans to manufacture and market them. First, she secured a trademark: Do-With Toys™. She demonstrated the toys and dolls to teachers during a 1909 meeting of the International Kindergarten Union, held at Buffalo, New York. Under a banner headline of her trademarked name, copy for advertisements placed in The Craftsman (1909) reads: “There are many toys for Grown-ups. Do-withs are for Children. Don’t mistake Art Models for Toys — Children know the difference.” “Do-withs are playable, durable, makeable, artistic” (p. vi). The ad refers buyers of Do-With Toys™ to art stores, craft shops, and a catalog issued by Pratt. The catalog of her toys has not been located in any searches.

The fledgling capitalist venture of manufacturing and selling dolls and toys got off to an exciting start. Pratt promoted her toys in an assortment of newspaper interviews. An article in the Evening Post (1909b), reprinted in the Washington Herald (1909), about the toys, for instance, repeats Pratt’s views on types of toys, the first two favoured by adults, the third by children: Do-Nothings (toys that do nothing by themselves and are not fun to play with); Look-Ons (mechanical toys that do all the playing by themselves after having been wound up), and Do-Withs (Pratt’s toys, or “toys for the do-with children;” those that “just seem to be inviting you to come and play with them”). The New York Tribune (1910a) asserted that Pratt began her venture after a boy told her that he lost interest in his mechanical toys because they played for him, not with him. The Tribune reporter visited the workshop where Pratt — a “slight little woman with big blue eyes” — kept models of “wooden horses, cows, cartwheels, shafts, and what-nots.” New York Herald (1910a) had a three-quarter page, well-illustrated article on “The Birth Of The Do-With Toy.” The Herald reporter wrote, “The Toy designer, who is Miss Caroline Pratt, is only starting on her career and profession. The ‘Do-Whits’ are still in their infancy, and at present they are all born in Greenwich Village, where Miss Pratt presides over a small workshop.” The reporter informed readers that Patty S. Hill (1868-1946) of the kindergarten department at Teachers College recommended the toys; that the Ethical Culture School used them in kindergarten work and that in January 1911 Pratt would present a Toy Shop or Playshop in the Child Welfare Exhibition (see also New York Herald, 1910c).

1911: Three Demonstrations of Do-With Toys™

Between January 18 and February 12, 1911, Pratt demonstrated her dolls, toys and specially designed blocks — Unit Blocks — at the Child Welfare Exhibit in New York City in the 71st Regiment Armory. Note that Pratt and Harriet Johnson, her housemate, colleague WTUL Officer, and good friend of the Public Education Association were on the exhibit’s Sub Committee on Home Life, which organized the exhibition. Three months later Pratt would demonstrate her Do-Whits at the Child Welfare Exhibit in the Coliseum in Chicago (May 11 to May 15). And at the end of 1911, she demonstrated them at an exhibition of Christmas gifts at the Teachers College educational museum.

Pratt’s toys were well-received in the press. Public media reported widely on civic exhibits. As well, charitable organizations funded magazines (like The Survey) promoted the civic exhibits, which were useful means for publicity campaigns to bring progressive
issues to the public’s attention. At their best, they adopted a mission to educate public opinion by initiating democratic debates. Appealing to emotion, and secondarily to reason, the promotional articles made heavy use of graphics — photographs, charts, maps and drawings — as well as human-interest stories and announced lectures, public debates and discussions (Aubert, 2002). Stories about the 1911 New York City and Chicago Child Welfare Exhibits are typical examples. Exactly a month before the opening of the first exhibit, the New York Herald (1910b) announced that Pratt would be the exhibit's toy maker supervising the Playshop. Eighteen days prior to the exhibit, the San Francisco Call (1911) ran a lengthy article about her toys and dolls. Among other things, the reporter focused on Pratt’s view that dolls and toys should possess proper relative proportions. Diverse newspapers and magazines in several states pointed out that the New York City and Chicago exhibits introduced a new manner of toys, toys that simultaneously engaged, delighted, and taught children.194 An interview with Pratt about her toys in the Whitesville News (1911), an upstate New York newspaper, was reprinted in newspapers in Iowa, Nebraska, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin.195 A report in Life and Labor, the WTUL magazine, auspiciously describes the dolls as having “nice strong bodies and firm joints and steady bases” (O'Reilly, 1911, p. 197). The reporter added that they “can’t come to pieces, they can hardly wear out and the little child can “Do” all sorts of things “With” them” (ibid.). Adjacent to the article is a snapshot of the Playshop.196 A journalist exclaimed in the Evening World, “Miss Pratt is a genius in her line” (Patterson, 1911).

Many children visited Pratt’s stand to play with the Do-With dolls and toys, while the escorting adults visited the booth to read illustrated political rhymes on the walls. Among the reports in newspapers, there was a rather silly story in the New York Call sketching a boy visiting the exhibit, unaccompanied, finding the information given quite disappointing (G. Potter, 1911). The story’s author told what the boy bumped into at Pratt’s Playshop: “Better for the child to have these crude toys which typify the savage time of development in racial constructiveness. No, little boy, you can’t take it away. No, I am sorry. You must leave it for other children to see and their papas and mammas. “I—like—it—so,” began the child hoarsely. But it was taken gently from his arms.” Pratt (1911a) replied in a letter to the editor, calling Potter’s overdone story “a scathing arraignment.”

In an article appearing in both The Survey and The Reform Advocate, Pratt (1911c) promoted her Child Welfare Exhibit Playshop experiences by highlighting two opposing movements,

- away from ‘the good ol’-days,’ when play material was widely available (stones, bricks, sticks, etc.) and when children used these materials as tools to imitate the processes and industries of the grown-ups around them (agricultural work, manufacturing work)
- to modern times, where children have to play with toys instead of play materials, given to them by the grown-ups not engaged in processes or industries children can imitate by playing with those toys, “the play instincts of [these children thereby] debauched and neglected to an alarming extent” (p. 893).197

Kindergarten teachers and adults who advise parents which toys and kindergarten materials to buy formed the first movement. Pratt’s “individual effort to market better toys...to satisfy the demands for playability, durability, makeability (toys with which children can make things of their choosing), and artistic merit” (ibid.) formed the second movement.
Due to wide press coverage of the exhibits, Pratt and her Do-With Toys™ achieved a pre-internet kind of instant fame not only in New York City and Chicago; she and her toys became known in many parts of the country. Her exhibit demonstrations made a considerable impression.¹⁹⁸

Lastly in 1911, from November 24 to December 20, the Teachers College educational museum had a small exhibition of Christmas gifts, organized under the auspices of the Kindergarten-Primary Association of the Horace Mann School in cooperation with the Department of Kindergarten Education of Teachers College.¹⁹⁹ Patty Hill, at the time Assistant Professor of Kindergarten Education, prepared and presided over the exhibit.²⁰⁰ During opening day remarks, Hill echoed Pratt’s idea that “The purpose of the good toy is to inspire the child to work, to exert its imagination, to occupy itself, in some manner however unconscious, which will bear on its later life” (in Evening Post, 1911d). The Evening Post reporter, possibly unaware of Pratt’s contributions, notes that “Miss Hill calls her ideal toys ‘do with’ toys,” adding that everything at the exhibition was “designed to make the youngsters work and think to the limit of their pleasure. In a corner resides the “do-with family,” the members of which could be adjusted to sit down, to walk, or to drive the horse and cart in the stable.”²⁰¹ The article concludes by expounding that Hill was “a believer in manual training.” Hill clarified, “Through manual training...the child learns to sympathize with those who must work — learns to understand.”²⁰²

Do-With Toys™: A Generic Name?

Implicit in the name Do-With Toys™ is Pratt’s perspective that these toys will motivate children to active, dramatic play. Pratt (1948) wrote in her autobiography that the toys “were so designed that they could be used by the children to portray familiar activities such as barn, house, or street schemes...I named my brain-children Do-Whits — and for a time I had high hopes that I had created something that would revolutionize education” (p. 24).

In spite of the extended press coverage of the three 1911 demonstrations of Do-Whits, the Guide Book To Childhood (Forbush, 1913, p. 183) and Manual of Play (Forbush, 1914, p. 286) state, without attribution, “Someone has classed toys as ‘Do-nothings,’ ‘Look-Ons’ and ‘Do-Whits.’” It is obvious that Pratt’s name somehow did not attach to her trademark. While between 1909 and 1911, Pratt had been portrayed as Do-Whits inventor, by 1913 her trademark had ellipsed her personage. In a very short time, Do-Whits became generic for a type of toys and dolls —not reference to specific toys made by a Do-With Toys™ company. Before long, a mechanical toys versus Do-Whits dichotomy became a generalized description of conflicting kinds of children’s toys.²⁰³ Although this can be perceived as a marketing accomplishment, by 1914, the generic identification complicated matters. Manufacturing and selling Do-Whits most certainly had not become the success for which Pratt had hoped.²⁰⁴ Perhaps this contributed to the establishment of a business partnership, first announced in the June 1914 issue of Country Life in America. “Do-With Toys are now made and sold by The Stryvelyne Shop cooperating with Miss Caroline Pratt who announces many new toys and toy schemes.” This declaration of intent seemed a promising sign of achievement. Pratt had found a genuine business partner — the Stryvelyne Shop, a spanking new manufacturer of educational toys. In August 1914, the Stryvelyne Shop would lease the twelfth loft in a new building at 7 to 11 West 45th Street, New York City (Bookseller, Newsdealer and Stationer, 1914). Pratt arranged for the Stryvelyne Shop to sell her toys exclusively in 1914.
1911-1914: Some Theorizing about Toys and Child Play

In addition to her 1911 “Toys: A Usurped Educational Field,” issued in The Survey and The Reform Advocate, Pratt wrote two other texts theorizing about toys and child play.

Around the time Stryvelyne Shop incorporated, spring 1914, the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations included a chapter by Pratt in their 1914 Parents and Their Problems book series. Pratt’s (1914a) theses are: Children learn through play; the “essential difference between work and play is that work is productive” (p. 114); and toys “have their place as the instruments of play, just as garden tools have their place as the instruments of gardening” (p. 117). While, perhaps, she was influenced by the language of Deweyan instrumentalists, her rationale has more than a tinge of longing for a past that never was cliché. Since modern children no longer have opportunity to gather “so easily play material from the life around them” (p. 119), as they did in a bucolic, pre-industrial age, they no longer have “the sort of real experiences of which they see the beginning and end and therefore, to some extent, the meaning” (ibid.). It was not idle romanticism, longing for a return of a more pastoral age. Her contentions reflect her personal transition from matriculating in comforts of a childhood life in rural upstate New York to the urban conditions of turn-of-century Manhattan. In this small aspect, her life story was not entirely different from a Clara Lemlich who grew up in the Ukrainian Shtetl Horodok in the Khmelnytskyi Oblast province, or William Wirt who grew up in Markle, Indiana, or John Dewey who grew up in Burlington, Vermont. A historian noted, “Most settlement workers had an ambivalent attitude toward the city: they hated it, were fascinated and appalled by it, and they loved it. Occasionally they denounced the city; but they elected to live in it” (Davis, 1967, p. 23). However, the days of settlement work and organizing strike support were behind Pratt.

Pratt’s (1914b) “The Toys That Children Like,” in Woman’s Magazine, warns about giving children “unrelated toys.” “It is too much to expect children to play with unrelated toys. It is as inconsistent as to expect a gardener to garden with a pitchfork, a shovel and a hammer.” Instead, children should play with related toys that “indicate the play that may be carried out with them...[In] order to have play ‘succeed’ it is necessary to treat it quite as seriously as work, and in many respects to apply the self-same principles.” Pratt concluded, “Those first few years when children play with toys are the years when fundamental habits are formed. Such habits as ‘thinking things out’ and ‘keeping at’ things are most easily formed in childhood and may be more readily fostered through play than later on through work.” With such statements, she offered specific means to implement a theory of learning that is fully consistent with American pragmatism in the philosophical tradition of William James.

1913: “The Shop Might Serve as a Clearing House for the Whole School”

Since the summer months of 1884, when she had her first teaching experience at a school near Pompey, Caroline Pratt had never ceased being an educator — though she did not teach continuously in formal school settings. Between 1887 and 1892, she was a primary school teacher in Fayetteville; between 1894 and 1901, she was a teacher of teachers in Philadelphia; from 1902 to 1909, she taught carpentry in New York City. She did not engage in classroom teaching between 1909 and 1913, when she re-invented herself as a self-made toy manufacturer, simultaneously living the life of a militant WTUL trade unionist. She certainly remained an uncompromising political activist and she was a member of the Socialist Party, serving on their standing Committee on Education. Pratt had resigned from organizing woodwork classes at the Hartley House in the fall of 1908
in order to carry out WTUL work. Trade union activities consumed much of her time and energy until the spring of 1910. The conclusion of the shirtwaist strike, however, meant that she was able to direct her efforts to less stressful trade union, Socialist, feminist and suffragist causes. Her toy designing and manufacturing venture, which began in 1908, became important in 1910 when she and Harriet Johnson were on a committee to organize a toys and playthings exhibition.

In 1911, Pratt demonstrated Do-Whits at Child Welfare exhibits in New York City and Chicago and at a Teachers College educational museum exhibit. She also began developing theories about school organization issues, toys, and child play. More and more, she was focusing on education again, dearly wishing to return to teaching — if possible, in an experimental school. By now, she had a plan to establish her own school. In order to have a successful start, she would first work out means to socialize schools in general — in a document systematically addressing steps necessary to accomplish her end; next, she would establish a pilot experimental class to test her hypotheses, and third, in case the test outcome confirmed her theoretical stance in practice, she would found an experimental school. What exactly would the school’s aim be? Her contemporaneous educational vision, her hypothesis as it were, was embedded in a single line her in 1913 American Teacher article: the “shop might serve as a clearing house for the whole school” (Pratt, 1913, p. 99). It is truly fascinating to note that one-and-a-half years prior to the publication of her American Teacher article, Pratt published “To Socialize the Schools,” the lead article in the March 1912 issue of Educational Foundations, emphasizing how to bring about conditions constructive to individual as well as social learning in schools where shop work is central. To reform the state of the schools, Pratt (1912b) suggested socializing schools, (1) “By means of actual social relationships” (p. 386) — through active student occupations, like shop work, instead of through deskbound occupations; (2) “By means of knowledge about social relationships” (ibid.) — through geography, literature, etc., instead of only educating the so-called 3 R’s; that is, through social studies brought into the curriculum; (3) “By relating 1 and 2.” (ibid.).

She identified five conditions in the existing schools that were unfavourable to individual and social growth of students: (i) large classes, (ii) antisocial teachers, (iii) lack of teacher freedom, (iv) antiquated teaching methods, and (v) lack of time. As a plan of reform, Pratt proposed shop work, gymnastics, clubs, domestic economy and clubs and classes of others than schoolchildren. She also made proposals to be followed by teachers. Those related to shop work were central to the ones related to the other topics (p. 387):

Instead of being formal and taught only or largely for purely individual development, shop work should be free and taught for the sake of developing a social sense among children. 1. By relating it to other interests, such as home, school and play. At present this could be brought about by having the child choose his own models and put the product to actual use for the purpose intended, at once. 2. By establishing, wherever possible without forcing it, an interest in working together in the making of things. 3. By connecting the work wherever and whenever possible with the regular occupations of the school.

Gymnastic lessons should consist of organized play and organized sport. The aim of clubs “should be to do something that can be done better in a group than by the children as individuals” (ibid.). Both shop work and domestic economy should “be open to boys and girls alike” (ibid.). The aims of clubs and classes of adults at the settlements should be “to bring about closer connections with the homes of the school children. The settlements offer suggestions as to the nature of such clubs and classes” (ibid.). The
teachers should visit the children’s homes, live in the school’s neighborhood, and make
the interest of the parents their own.

Several of the above topics reveal the influence of Pratt’s 1901-1908 Hartley
House settlement experiences and her 1908-1912 union viewpoints. It is therefore not
surprising that she ended her article by advising teachers to “be able to put the people in
touch with all the agencies for bettering their conditions” (p. 388). Here intertwine her
educational, political, and social reform ideals. Pratt’s article is effectively an
experimental school research proposal — to be used to solicit philanthropic support for a
pilot experiment in ‘socializing a school.’ It may even actually be (at least part of) the
very proposal that persuaded Edna Smith, Pratt’s exceptionally wealthy friend, colleague,
and WTUL ally, to fund a planned experimental class. Pratt’s pilot experimental
kindergarten class, financed indeed by Edna Smith (the grant was time demarcated),
became reality in the spring of 1913 in the main assembly room of the Hartley House.
For two months Pratt observed the play of six children who test-played with her wooden
toys and jointed dolls and with blocks she had devised. She observed them adjusting to
their new environment, to the toys, blocks and tools, to each other, to new ideas, to
learning to work together. In fact, she observed six children in her experimental class
promoting socializing conditions constructive to individual as well as social learning
activities. Pratt (1948) made the six test-players the inventors of her field trip method.
“My six little teachers soon showed me I could do better than read stories to them about
the things they needed to know. I could take them where they could see for themselves”
(p. 34). By the start of the summer break, Pratt declared the two-month trial a success.

Next, in September 1913, Pratt and Smith co-founded an experimental school,
Play School. Pratt rented an apartment at the corner of Fourth and Twelfth Streets in
Greenwich Village, welcoming eleven four- and five-year old children from the locality
largely populated by children and their parents like those who had participated in the
garment workers’ strikes. Their parents were “hard working members of the humbler
professions, street cleaners and plumbers and white collar folk of modest kevels, the
respectable poor” (Pratt, 1948, p. 40). Smith, now on a larger scale, again subsidized the
experiment, this time for a year.

Some time in 1914, Helen Marot, Caroline Pratt, and Edna Smith moved into a
three-story town house at 206 West Thirteenth Street. The ground floor and part of the
second floor were reserved for Play School. Smith and Pratt were the school’s sole
teachers. A year later, Marot (1915b) described the school in a New Republic article,
noting the informal shop-work-like activities and ways that the children adjusted to their
environment (p. 16):

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 — that is, the
part with which they come in contact — 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.

1914-1915: The Play School Flourishes

Pratt’s 1911-1914 articles on toys and child play made a distinct impression in
educational circles. Press coverage of her 1908-1912 activities — political, unionist, and
educational — simply enhanced the impression that Pratt had become a major player (no pun intended) within the educational innovation movement.

Not long after its founding, Play School began receiving official visitors. In April 1914, Harriet Johnson — head of the Visiting Teacher Staff of the Public Education Association — *bineted* the children at the school, meaning, she administered intelligence tests to the school’s children.\(^{210}\) There were visits too from other “WTUL allies and settlement workers...interested in educational innovations” (Carlton, 1986, p. 188), like Harriet Forbes of the Public Education Association — Harriet Johnson’s life-long companion. Others made an appointment too, like poet Amy Lowell (see Lowell, 1920). In this context, however, a sudden early 1915 media coverage of the school is in fact most remarkable. Media interest appears directly connected to Pratt’s toys business scheme. The joint venture with the Stryvelyne Shop to market the wooden jointed dolls and toys that she announced in 1914 (see above), never caught steam. It was even worse. The Stryvelyne Shop, incorporated in 1914, went bankrupt in the winter of 1915, smashing her hopes of a successful outlet.\(^{211}\) That dream squashed, Pratt had to give up her plans of manufacturing and marketing toys and dolls.

The 1915 downfall of the Do-With Toys™ venture contributed to the success of Play School. After the swift liquidation of Stryvelyne Shop, Pratt immediately gave her attention to a publicity campaign for the school.\(^{212}\) She invited the media to her school and illustrated its aims to them. As a consequence, we learn a great deal about the school’s curriculum from the early 1915 press reports. Famed educator and journalist Henrietta Rodman (1915a) was the first to find her way to the school, reporting in the *New York Tribune* that she was extremely happy to have found a place where children “get knowledge of life and opportunity for creative activity,” which according to her are “the things” children were “not getting in the public schools.”\(^{213}\) Her article began, “Have you ever gone to the Play School, at 206 West Thirteenth Street? It’s as full of toys as Santa Claus’s pack, and as full of children as the old woman’s shoe, when she didn’t know what to do. But Miss Caroline Pratt knows exactly what to do. She gives the toys to the children, and then watches them play.” Rodman described with a keen eye for detail what she saw in the diverse schoolrooms. “I saw a wooden river flowing between banks of blocks.” The portrayal of the school concludes, “If I were the Board of Education, I should say: ‘My dear Miss Pratt, here is a school building; here are children and here are young women to work with you. If you need anything else in order to do your beautiful work and to teach others to do it, please let us know.’”\(^{214}\)

A few days later, the *New York Tribune* ran a two-third-page long, illustrated interview with Pratt. The article, without any hesitation, proclaimed Play School, “under the direction of Miss Caroline Pratt and Miss Edna Smith [the] School of the Future” (Fleischman, 1915). The children in the school were neither compelled to learn, nor forced to play. They played the games they wanted to play, wherever they wanted to play them, and learned while playing them. For example, while measuring the size of a car they wished to construct, they learned and used arithmetic. If a child “builds a bridge, or makes a grain elevator, it is learning physics, for it has to figure weights, balances and many other principle, all unconsciously.” The article describes children running about and playing on balconies, at the sand box, at a workbench, making a clock, playing with wooden cars, drawing spontaneously. Pratt explained that drawing is a mode of expression, but it serves more purposes; it helps children observe their world, and it helps them express themselves in the sense of expressing their thoughts about their observations. It also aids to the fine motor co-ordination of their fingers.

Pratt found that teaching lower-grades in public schools overly relied on premature acquiring of reading and writing. The same was true for the Montessori
Method, she declared. Play School children, on the other hand, would learn how to read and write when they were a little older. Highlighting Play School’s field trips into the city, Pratt argued, “When they see a wagon on the street, they must know where it has come from and where it is going. On the way from the wholesaler to the retailer, and a simple explanation of the fundamentals of commerce, they learn about the policeman who stops the wagon, and traffic regulations. And incidentally they learn about police systems of other nations, and something about what the various governments stand for” (in Fleischman, 1915). Pratt told the reporter that she had not a picked class of children. Play School children were “children of the neighborhood, and their fathers are of the class of skilled mechanics” (ibid.).

1915: Nationwide Recognition and New Financial Support

Some time late 1914, perhaps early 1915, Evelyn Dewey visited the school, doing onsite observational research for the highly influential Schools of To-Morrow, the book, issued in May of 1915, that she co-authored with her father, John Dewey. The Deweys’ (1915) uncritical report found that Pratt’s school “organizes all the work around the play activities of little children” (p. 116). Every child in the school “has floor space of his own with a rug, and screens to isolate him sufficiently so that his work is really individual” (p. 117). Pratt’s role as a teacher was “to teach the pupil processes and control of tools, not in a prearranged scale but as they are needed in construction” (p. 118).

The Deweys, Rodman (1915a), and Fleischman (1915) praised the amount and quality of playthings present in the school. Marot’s (1915) description, fascinatingly, points out similar features. Pratt’s Play School combined and integrated skills (the 3 Rs) with arts (drawing, shop work, painting, music, movement, and in Pratt’s case, using Do-With Toys™ and Unit Blocks she had designed).

These Play School essays — appearing in a leading journal, leading newspapers, and a best selling book in 1915 — paid ample attention to another aspect of the school as well. As a central, organizing core of the curriculum, the children made regular excursions of discovery, that is, trips to nearby areas and landmarks. Play School’s social studies consisted of field trips in the neighbourhood, to the harbour, to shops, to parks, to factories, etc. On return students were to reconstruct experiences gained, through block-building, drawing, drama. Reflecting Pratt’s aims to include a Socialist view of the working class ethos, field trips would target places where people worked and made their living. Students would learn about the world they inhabited. The New York Tribune article enticingly describes the children’s numerous expeditions in search of knowledge (Fleischman, 1915). Later that year, Marot (1915b) quoted from Play School promotional material to note: “We trace the interdependence of traffic and industry. We watch wagons and guess what they contain, where they are going and where they came from. We trace them to the railroads and back to the stores, we follow them to the river, loaded with rocks and dirt which we have already seen taken out of the subway excavations; and then we see these loaded on boats. The life of the city is thus transformed from an itinerant circus to a field of discovery, marvellous in content and intellectual stimulus” (pp. 16-17). The statement Marot cited is missing. Afterwards the children back at school reconstructed their activities, ’worked’ their experiences, tying impressions gained during the trips with what can without hesitation be called social studies perspectives.215

Descriptions of Jacob Pestalozzi’s 1805 experiential school in Yverdon, Switzerland, and Marietta Johnson’s 1907 Fairhope School of Organic Education, show that schools had used outings in nature.216 In those schools, the trips were ancillary.
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Pratt’s great innovation was to make them central to the curriculum, and do so in a neighbourhood largely populated by working class immigrants. These outings — these children’s expeditions of discovering interdependencies of the physical and social aspects of their urban environment — led to the activities later outlined by Sprague Mitchell (1926, 1928b, 1929, and 1950). Indeed, Play School children were young geographers in the true sense of the word (Seeds, 1928). They were more. They felt they were young road workers, young clerks and young underground employees, young nurses and young politicians, and the like, sharing and working their common experiences. Pratt and her colleagues had created learning conditions that John Dewey (1911a) had defined as real education: a “process of the continuous reconstruction of experience with the purpose of widening and deepening its social content, while, at the same time, the individual gains control over the methods involved” (p. 400).

All media attention had a hoped-for aftermath. Marot’s story about Play School appeared in The New Republic, a new journal of opinion, founded in 1914 with financial support of Willard Straight (1880-1918), a banker, and his wife Dorothy Payne (née Whitney) Straight (1887-1965), a social activist and supporter of women’s trade unions (Rauchway, 2001). In 1904, Mrs. Straight had come into a major inheritance. According to Cohen (1964), Dorothy Straight was “fabulously wealthy” (p. 66). Previously, she had liberally subsidized the Public Education Associations’ Visiting Teacher project — reviewed above. She was pre-eminent among the Public Education Association donors. In 1913, she became a member of the Fairhope League — as did Mrs. Graham Bell and First Lady Mrs. Woodrow Wilson — financially supporting Marietta Johnson’s educational experiments (The Sun, 1914). She also subsidized the Play School in its founding years. Pratt (1948) remembered a visit by Dorothy Straight, according to her due to the release of Schools of To-Morrow. “As a result there were more visitors and some offers of financial assistance. Mrs. Willard Straight came with a friend and spent a whole morning, and the size of the check she sent me later was generous evidence that the morning had been interesting” (p. 55). The survival of the school was secured again now that Edna Smith’s generous initial financial support had been spent.

6 November 1915: Rejoice and Tragedy

It is imperative to note here that Caroline Pratt did not mention her life-long companion Helen Marot’s 1915 New Republic article in her autobiography, or in any of her writings on the Play School. A late 1915 tragedy may explain why.

A biography of birth control activist Margaret Sanger (1879-1966) tells that Sanger fled the United States in 1914 after having made “arrangements with Marot and Pratt to take care of her youngest children while she was gone” (Gray, 1979, p. 81). The reason for her exile: a federal government reaction to her monthly newsletter The Woman Rebel, launched early in 1914, promoting contraception. In April 1914, post office authorities served notice that the newsletter was “unmailable” (New York Times, 1914a). In August 1914, Sanger was indicted for violating U.S. postal obscenity laws for attempting to mail copies to subscribers. She was arrested “on four criminal charges carrying a maximum sentence of forty-five years” (Adickes, 1997, p. 132). In October 1914, she appeared in court charged by the federal government with violating postal codes. Not long after, Sanger left for Canada, fleeing to England under an alias name. She put her youngest children — Grant, aged six, and Peggy, aged four and a half — in the care of Helen Marot and Caroline Pratt. At some time in the spring of 1915, both children left Pratt and Marot to be taken care of by their father. The Sanger children then entered the Stelton Modern School in New Jersey, as boarders together with 27 other students. By
the end of October in 1915, Margaret Sanger returned to the United States. Sanger’s (1938) autobiography recounts the tragedy that followed. “A few days after my arrival Peggy was taken ill with pneumonia...Peggy died the morning of November 6, 1915” (pp. 138-139). Sanger “suffered a nervous breakdown” (Avrich, 1980, p. 238).

Marot and Pratt were shattered too. After all, they had cared for Peggy for several months. They were also shocked by the news that Peggy’s death took place on November 6, 1915 — the official publication date of Marot’s article on Pratt’s school in *The New Republic*. This tragedy may certainly explain why Pratt never spoke of Marot’s article. It must have been ever so painful for her to think back to this dramatic and confusing day, to think about Marot’s gracious article describing the school without remembering the tragic death of Peggy Sanger at the same time.

**1916: The Play School Moves to 14, MacDougal Alley**

The next chapter in Caroline Pratt’s achievement story opens with Lucy Sprague Mitchell visiting her school time and again in 1913, 1914 and in 1915. These visits inescapably led to a very close merging of professional and private life, not only of the Marot-Pratt couple, but of other former WTUL activists and Public Education Association employers too. At some time in late 1913, Harriet Johnson and Sprague Mitchell jointly visited Pratt’s school. Sprague Mitchell (1953) wrote, “I kept visiting Caroline Pratt’s little school...becoming more and more convinced that it was only through an experimental approach in such a school that I could learn what children were really like. I wanted to be a part of this experiment” (p. 251). By the end of 1915, and during the winter of 1916, a group of staff colleagues of Sprague Mitchell at the Psychological Survey of the Public Education Association, together with her husband Wesley Clair Mitchell (1874-1948), a former student of Dewey, and several of their progressive friends, began discussing an idea to establish and organize an educational clearinghouse. They planned bringing together and publicizing information about progressive educational experiments in the United States. The group included Harriet Forbes and Harriet Johnson, Elisabeth Irwin, and Eleanor Johnson, all working for the Public Education Association. Plus, there was Jean Lee Hunt, a friend who was at the time still working as Secretary of the Fairhope League in support of Marietta Johnson’s endeavours. Helen Marot and Caroline Pratt formed part of this group too. In their first meetings, these highly effective progressive organizers, most of whom had cut their teeth during the WTUL support of the shirtwaist strike of 1909, called themselves the Bureau of School Information.

In March 1916, an aunt of Sprague Mitchell’s died, leaving her daughter Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge fabulous wealth. Coolidge offered to use part of her inheritance to support the plans for the envisaged clearinghouse. Following a meeting of Coolidge and Sprague Mitchell, the Bureau of School Information planners evaluated their original planning and came up with a new scheme. The evaluated plan integrated the original clearinghouse plans with expanded plans of a laboratory school for handicapped children, “psychological analyses of normal children,” sex education lessons, and Pratt’s school (Antler, 1987, p. 219). The renewed plans made Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge first commit $50,000 a year for the period of ten years, but in second instance, she committed the first ten forthcoming annual dividends of her stocks, amounting up to $50,000 a year, to the organization to be established. In May 1916 the Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE) was born. Caroline Pratt became a charter member as well as a member of the original “temporary governing committee; called the Working Council” (p. 220).
Pratt’s ties with Sprague Mitchell had become very close within a time-span of only two-and-a-half years. These ties would become even much closer, merging personal and professional life again, comparable to the months of the 1909-1910 shirtwaist makers’ strike. In the fall of 1915, a year before the Mitchell family moved from West Tenth Street to 15 Washington Square North, Sprague Mitchell had already offered to house part of the ever more expanding Play School — if needed. In 1916 her promise turned reality when the school moved into an old stable behind the new Mitchell home — with a separate entrance at 14 MacDougal Alley. They converted the stable into a proper school with three classrooms, and turned the back yard into a fitting play-yard. In 1918 the school hired additional space at 30 MacDougal Alley. Nonetheless, until December 1918 two groups of children would remain attending school at 206 West Thirteenth Street — that is, at Marot and Pratt’s townhouse. We do not know the exact number of teachers at the time. By September 1919 the school employed ten teachers.222

In the fall of 1916, then, to finish this chapter, the school’s population would slowly change to primarily middle-class children and children from moderately affluent parents. Sprague Mitchell began teaching the five-year group at the school, releasing Pratt from classroom obligations, making room for supervising prospective Play School teachers and spreading out BEE activities.

This ends the account of when, how, and why Caroline Pratt joined the BEE. In 1916, Pratt had reached the stage of her life where she would simultaneously remain principal of Play School and charter member of the Bureau of Educational Experiments for thirteen years.223 She had been primary education teacher, student at the Teachers College, teacher of teachers, researcher and social settlement reformer, lecturer, trade unionist, WTUL ally, Socialist, author of critical texts, toy manufacturer and political activist — eventually in 1913 founding the school of her political inspired dreams. The coming chapter will sketch what became of the BEE during the years until 1919.