

Matriarchs of Experimental and Progressive Education: Ten Women Who Influenced John Dewey

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Abstract

John Dewey (1859-1952), a father and pioneer of progressive education during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, continues to be the most acknowledged proponent of progressive and experimental education in the 21st century. Numerous documents have reported Dewey's influence on educational leaders, including many women, during the 1900s and beyond. However, recent studies have shed new light on Dewey's contributions to education and psychology. This article describes ten women who explicitly influenced the ideas of John Dewey and the practices of experimental education. These include Alice Chipman, Jane Addams, Katherine Camp, Ella Flagg Young, Anna Bryan, Evelyn Dewey, Marietta Johnson, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Patty Smith Hill, and Caroline Pratt.

Key words: progressive education, women, Dewey, experimental schools

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, John Dewey (1859-1952) was synonymous with progressive education. For the past 20 years the perception of Dewey as the leader of experimental and progressive education has rapidly changed. Lagemann (2000) said, "Frequently claimed to have been the father of progressive education...Dewey has served as something of a cultural icon" (p. 42). She further reported Dewey has been "alternatively praised and damned by thinkers on both the right and the left. This might capture his place in the history of education more accurately than to say he was important as a reformer" (p. 42). Further, Dewey is often discussed in relation to the people he influenced (Alexander, 1987; Bernstein, 1966; Boisvert, 1997; Garrison, 2010; Pappas, 2008; Roth, 1962; Shook, 2000). He is rarely described in terms of those who contributed to his educational theories and practices, especially with regard to women influences (Aldridge, 2009; Aldridge & Christensen, 2013; Lagemann, 2000; Staring, 2013). The purpose of this article is to describe the contributions ten women made to John Dewey's philosophies, theories, and practices in education. These include Alice Chipman, Jane Addams, Katherine Camp, Ella Flagg Young, Anna Bryan, Evelyn Dewey, Marietta Johnson, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Patty Smith Hill, and Caroline Pratt.

Alice Chipman (1858-1927)

As an orphan, Alice Chipman was raised by her maternal grandparents, Evaline and Frederick Riggs. She became a social activist and teacher and attended the

University of Michigan where she met John Dewey (Stack, 2009). She took classes from John Dewey and they later married. "Eventually the couple ended up at the University of Chicago after a brief time at the University of Minneapolis. At Chicago, Dewey is credited for developing the lab school, often with little mention of Alice's contributions. In actuality, Alice was just as instrumental in forming the school" (Aldridge, 2009, p. 115). In fact, Alice "formulated curriculum, taught at and was the principal of the School and was actively involved in all of the Dewey School's program. She was equally instrumental in the School's original establishment as Dewey often was more philosophical than practical in his approaches" (Wolfe, 2000, p. 181). Even though John Dewey credited Alice Chipman Dewey with many of his ideas and inspirations, this has not been extensively reported (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013). This was especially true with regard to John Dewey's views concerning social activism, the balance between the child centered curriculum and social responsibility, and his beliefs about women's roles in society (Wolfe, 2000). Alice Dewey's progressive ideas extended beyond the Dewey School to advocate for children's, women's, and African American's rights. She was also instrumental in the formation of the National Women's Suffrage Association (Stack, 2009).

Jane Addams (1860-1935)

Jane Addams became famous for the progressive education she developed and used at Hull House in Chicago (Addams, 1930; Elshtain, 2002; Knight, 2010).

Beyond her fame as a progressivist, she was the most noted woman in the United States due to her political action and her advocacy for social welfare during the early 1900s (Elshtain, 2002). Even before John Dewey began working at the University of Chicago, he admired Ms. Addams' work and corresponded with her (Lagemann, 2000). Some of Dewey's ideas concerning education and democracy originated with Jane Addams. She taught him "how important teachers are in the development of children and families who live in poverty" (Aldridge, 2009, p. 113). While in Chicago, Dewey worked closely with Ms. Addams on several projects and sought her advice on numerous educational endeavors. "She encouraged him to be more pragmatic and descend from the ivory academic tower" (Wolfe, 2000, p. 181). Dewey incorporated Addams' pragmatic approach into both his teaching and writings. Specifically, Dewey used Addams' *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902) "as a teaching text in a course in which he invited Addams to lead class sessions with him" (Lagemann, 2000, p. 55).

Dewey believed there should be a balance in education between a focus on the individual child and society. Working with Jane Addams, Dewey was able to develop the societal side of his version of progressive education (Knight, 2010). Dewey learned this from Hull House and through Addams' intense advocacy for all children and their families. Her support for child labor laws, her help in establishing the first juvenile court, and her work to demand compulsory school attendance are three salient examples (Aldridge, 2009). Finally, Dewey learned the importance of changing society in myriad other ways from Jane Addams. "Addams...was searching for ways to transform social relations and establish patterns of thinking so that increasing numbers of people, from increasing numbers of cultural traditions, could live together in crowded, urban conditions and still maintain a sense of harmony, order, beauty, and progress" (Lagemann, 2000, p. 55). Dewey's beliefs and practices were changed through his interactions with Jane Addams, but more importantly, he personally changed as well, through Ms. Addams' example. Dewey learned from Ms. Addams the importance of working for societal change through advocacy and political action and other myriad ways, including how to promote social welfare through education and democracy (Lagemann, 2000).

Katherine Camp (1870-1946)

Perhaps the least known of the ten women described here is Katherine Camp. Katherine Camp attended the University of Michigan and completed her

B.S. degree in 1894 (Durst, 2010). After working for Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, Ms. Camp was invited to become a teacher at Dewey's Laboratory School (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936). In 1896, "Katherine Camp quickly settled in to her work at the Laboratory School, assuming what would be a central role in the school and by 1897, her sister Anna was ready to join her" (Durst, 2010, p. 36). At the school, Katherine Camp was not only a teacher, but became the head of the science department and for a short time, a teacher-principal (Durst, 2010). Through these roles, Katherine Camp was able to influence the thinking of John Dewey as well as the practices of the Laboratory School.

What was Katherine Camp's influence on John Dewey? Camp made several contributions to Dewey's thinking about the practical implications of his theories. Specifically, Ms. Camp and the other teachers developed and implemented teachers' reports that refined the approaches, goals, and objectives of the Dewey School. "The weekly teachers' reports provided an opportunity for teachers to articulate their reasons for particular approaches to subject matter and instructional methods and to document the outcomes of those practices with children" (Durst, 2010, p. 58). Ms. Camp and the teachers at the Laboratory School were also some of the first documented teachers as researchers (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936). While Dewey had theorized about teachers as researchers, it was Ms. Camp and her colleagues that showed Dewey how it could be done. Camp believed that "knowledge is discovered through collective inquiry" (Durst, 2010, p. 69). Although Katherine Camp was the leader, all of the female teachers who worked at the University of Chicago Laboratory School made contributions to Dewey's understanding of day to day operations in an elementary school. "This provided them with a chance to assume responsibilities, with accompanying satisfactions, rare in American schools of this era. In their published writings, school reports, and correspondence, the teachers left a record of the central role they played in the daily work of this educational experiment" (Durst, 2010, p. 73).

Finally, Katherine Camp was able to take Dewey's theories and explain how they were translated into practice at the Laboratory School. Through her publications in *Manual Training Magazine* and the book she completed with her sister entitled *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago 1896-1903* (1936), Camp provided explanations of how Dewey's educational ideas were implemented.

Ella Flagg Young (1845-1918)

The woman who probably influenced Dewey's ideas the most was Ella Flagg Young (Wolfe, 2000). In fact, many of Dewey's educational themes came from Young (Blount, 2002; Aldridge, 2009). Dewey once commented that Ella Flagg Young "was the wisest person about actual schools I ever saw. I would come over to her with these abstract ideas of mine and she would tell me what they meant" (Wolfe, 2000, p. 183).

Ms. Young "was a teacher, principal and superintendent of schools in Chicago, taught at the University of Chicago and was principal of the Chicago Normal School" (Wolfe, 2000, p. 183). She also served as the first woman president of the National Education Association (Aldridge, 2009). However, it was during the year 1900 that she worked closely with John Dewey at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. "In 1900, Ella Flagg Young assumed the position of supervisor of instruction" (Durst, 2010, p. 53). One of her greatest contributions was to demonstrate to the teachers at the school how to set clear goals and expectations without impeding the freedom of the faculty and students. Young was the person who "helped Dewey realize that this freedom did not come without responsibility and that successful schools required an organizational structure that enabled this freedom and responsibility to coexist" (Durst, 2010, p. 57).

While Dewey was at Chicago, Young completed her doctorate. Her dissertation was *Isolation in the School* (1901). From her research on public education, Young concluded, "students and teachers alike increasingly had been stripped of their capacity to make meaningful decisions about their daily conditions or their assigned tasks" (Blount, 2002, p. 171). Administrators were increasing their authority and increasingly, bureaucracy was taking over the schools. Young believed that teachers and students should have more autonomy and decision making abilities.

Anna Bryan (1858-1901)

Anna Bryan contributed to John Dewey's beliefs and practices concerning early childhood education. "During the first decade of the 20th century, the kindergarten at The University of Chicago's Laboratory School and other kindergartens throughout Chicago were perhaps the most progressive early childhood programs in the United States" (Aldridge, 2009, p. 116). This was partially due to the work of Anna Bryan. Anna Bryan was a pioneer in the kindergarten movement of the late 1900s. She became a teacher at the Louisville Training School for Kindergarten teachers where her first graduate was Patty Smith Hill, who also became a mother of the kindergarten movement in the early 20th

century (Wolfe, 2000). Eventually, Bryan became the principal of the Kindergarten Normal Department of Armour Institute in Chicago. While at the Institute she met and influenced the educational ideas of both John Dewey and Francis W. Parker. Specifically, "the establishment of the kindergarten at the Laboratory School and at schools throughout Chicago was one of her greatest contributions" (Aldridge, 2009, p. 116).

When Dewey needed help with establishing the kindergarten program The University of Chicago, it was Anna Bryan he called upon. It was Anna Bryan who helped create a paradigm shift from Froebelian kindergartens to progressive education early childhood education programs (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013). While Dewey's progressivism encompassed the lifespan, he relied heavily on Bryan for support, guidance, and practical applications of his kindergarten and early childhood programs at The University of Chicago (Wolfe, 2000).

Evelyn Dewey (1889-1965)

In 1904, John Dewey abruptly left The University of Chicago as a faculty member and director of the Laboratory School and accepted an appointment in the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University. From that time on, Dewey did not have a laboratory school to implement his progressive ideas. His experience with experimental and progressive schools was left to second hand experiences through visitations to these schools and collaborations with their administrators and teachers. Evelyn Dewey, daughter of John and Alice Dewey, assisted her father in examining the influence of experimental and progressive schools throughout the United States.

John Dewey relied heavily on his daughter regarding their research, writing, and publication of *Schools of Today* (1915). For this publication, Evelyn conducted a large portion of the research, visiting most of the progressive schools highlighted in the book. Evelyn was a main source of current innovations and practices in progressive schools throughout the United States (Dewey & Dewey, 1915; Dewey, 1919; Dewey, 1922; Dewey, Child & Ruml, 1920). While Dewey was lecturing and writing at Columbia University, Evelyn Dewey continued to study progressive schools and describe her findings to her father and the general public. Evelyn Dewey conducted in depth case studies of the Porter School (Dewey, 1919), and the Dalton Laboratory Plan (1922). Through the extensive research of his daughter, John Dewey was kept abreast of how progressive ideas were being translated in experimental schools and beyond.

Marietta Johnson (1864-1938)

Marietta Johnson was the founder and principal of the School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama. As a founding member of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), Ms. Johnson became one of the best known women in the movement. Although Johnson said she relied on the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau, and the writings of Nathan Oppenheim, the version of progressive and experimental education she developed in Fairhope was uniquely her own (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013; Staring, 2013). In 1913, John Dewey spent considerable time at the School of Organic Education to observe and take notes for the book he was writing with his daughter, *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915). During this time, his son attended and participated in the school.

What did John Dewey learn from Marietta Johnson and the Organic School? In Fairhope, Dewey found evidence, from the progressive educational viewpoint, of when children should be taught to read and write and learn mathematics and geography. What he gleaned from Ms. Johnson was to follow the child's natural path of development. "Following this path of natural growth, the child is led into reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, etc., by his own desire to know. We must wait for the desire of the child, for the consciousness of need...then we must promptly supply the means to satisfy the child's desire" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 15). Marietta Johnson believed that children should not be taught to read before eight or nine, and that the child should learn "numbers as part of the things he is playing with or using every day" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 16). Finally, all lessons, including writing, should be directly related to what the child is studying in the natural environment, of which she or he has an intense interest. For example, a class should "visit a neighboring truck farm, recognize as many vegetables as they can, and learn the names and characteristics of the new ones. When they are back in the schoolroom those that can write make a list of all the vegetables they can remember, thus combining with their nature lesson a lesson in writing" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 21).

Lucy Sprague Mitchell (1878-1967)

Another woman who influenced John Dewey was Lucy Sprague Mitchell. Dewey worked closely with Lucy Sprague Mitchell's husband, Wesley Clair Mitchell at Columbia University, and Lucy was actively engaged in progressive education through the Bureau of Educational Experiments which began in 1916. The

Bureau later became the Bank Street College of Education. "While Dewey was writing theoretical and philosophical texts about progressive education, Lucy Sprague Mitchell and her women colleagues at Bank Street were living progressive education every day—researching, teaching, and writing about children with whom they worked" (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013, p. 10).

Ms. Mitchell provided several practical lessons for progressive educators in general, and for John Dewey, in particular. She developed observation and documentation protocols for record keeping and for researching children interests and activities. As one of the pioneers of qualitative research, she taught Dewey and the leading progressives about the importance of documentation (Antler, 1987; Christensen, 2008). Another lesson Ms. Mitchell taught Dewey was about the salience and type of literature that was appropriate for progressive and experimental schools. Ms. Mitchell developed the *Here and Now Storybook Series* "by commissioning outstanding women writers such as Margaret Wise Brown" (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013, p. 6). Mitchell found that children learn better by reading material that is familiar to them from the "here and now" of their experiences. She also suggested that nonfiction literature concerning familiar places and topics was more appropriate for children than fiction or fantasy (Mitchell, 1953).

Patty Smith Hill (1868-1946)

Patty Smith Hill has been described as childhood's godmother (Fowlkes, 1984). Hill, along with Anna Bryan, were two of the first kindergarten reformers who moved early childhood education from the Froebelian philosophy to a more democratic and progressive orientation (Fowlkes, 1995; Snyder, 1972). They both spent their summers studying with many of the leading educators of their day, including Francis W. Parker, G. Stanley Hall, William James, and John Dewey (Rudnitski, 1995). Hill was also an active leader in the International Kindergarten Union (IKU) that eventually became the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI). She was also the founder of the National Association of Nursery Education which later developed into the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Hill made significant contributions to early childhood education. She was the coauthor of the "Happy Birthday" song and developer of large blocks, as well as the initiator of activity or learning centers for young children. She also was one of the original developers of health standards for children and advocate

for the inclusion of school nurses into early childhood education programs (Lacarides & Hinitz, 2000; Wolfe, 2000).

As Hill developed, implemented, and practiced her novel ideas in early childhood settings and later at the university level, she also contributed to John Dewey's knowledge and expertise in progressive education (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013). It was during a speech Ms. Hill gave at the Fourth Annual Convention of the Progressive Education Association that she articulated one of her greatest contributions to progressive education in general, and Dewey's philosophy of education, in particular (Hill, 1923). During the 1920s progressive education was criticized for not being scientific and that the results of experimental classrooms were either immeasurable or difficult to measure (Cremin, 1961; Lagemann, 2000). Ms. Hill (1923) suggested, "*We must be willing to subject our efforts in progressive education to the very severest tests that may be found*" (p. 13). Hill explained that in order for Dewey's ideas and progressive education to be accepted by the general public, it must be submitted to appropriate forms of psychological measurement.

Caroline Pratt (1867-1954)

In 1914, Caroline Pratt opened the Play School in the Greenwich Village area of New York City (Hauser, 2006). The Play School soon became a part of the Bureau of Educational Experiments where "Pratt was a founding member of the Working Council of the B.E.E." (Wolfe, 2000, p. 322). The Play School later became the City and Country School which is still in operation and true to the original ideals of Ms. Pratt (Hauser, 2006). Although Caroline Pratt made many contributions to progressive education, these "have either been forgotten or attributed to John Dewey" (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013, p. 16). According to Hauser (2006), Pratt "refused to be associated with any paternalistic doctrine of progressive education that was espoused by John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, and others" (p. 79). Even so, Pratt's City and Country School was a stellar exemplar of progressive education.

Pratt did contribute to John Dewey's perspective on democratic classrooms for young children. According to Semel (1995), Pratt's "creation of an educational community which students contributed cooperatively toward its maintenance while also learning experientially and through traditional means exemplified Dewey's idea of a school as a 'democratic workshop'" (p. 96). Pratt also developed a school in which children's "real work" reflected the jobs and occupations of the community.

Students ran a post office, operated a store, and made signs among other practical jobs that mirrored the community in which the school was located (Pratt, 1948). This reflection of the community was not contained within the school, but spilled over into the neighborhood. "Trips outside school were essential. Children needed to see the barges pulling coal up the Hudson River, and they needed to visit the varied and vast resources of the city (Yonemura, 1989, p. 58).

DISCUSSION

Each of the women reported here influenced John Dewey in some way. Alice Chipman Dewey and Katherine Camp worked as administrators and teachers at The University of Chicago Laboratory School. Jane Addams, Ella Flagg Young, and Anna Bryan collaborated with John Dewey, developing policies, procedures and programs for young children at the school. After leaving The University of Chicago, Dewey's daughter, Evelyn, visited and documented the practices of experimental schools throughout the United States, writing a book about it with her father. One of these schools was the School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama, begun by Marietta Johnson. Her approach to progressivism also had an impact on Dewey. While teaching at Columbia University, John Dewey encountered three women who were also directing experimental and progressive programs. These included Lucy Sprague Mitchell, head of the Bureau of Educational Experiments, Caroline Pratt, director of the City and Country School, and Patty Smith Hill, who taught with Dewey at Columbia University.

Many sources have reported John Dewey's influence on progressive education and have described his contributions to the works of these ten women. Fewer documents have recognized and acknowledged the impact the women had on John Dewey, his ideas, and experimental educational practices. However, in the past 20 years, this trend has begun to change. Many historiographies and educational reports have begun to question "who influenced whom" in progressive education. This article is another attempt at setting the record straight. While Dewey is still considered by many as the father of progressive education, there were many mothers of progressivism and experimental education as well. Ten of these have just been described here but there are many others. More research needs to be conducted to uncover and bring to the forefront other women leaders of progressive education, as well as other forgotten pioneers, both male and female, who were marginalized because of race and ethnicity.

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