

I LEARN FROM CHILDREN

*An Adventure in
Progressive Education*

by
Caroline Pratt



SIMON AND SCHUSTER

1948

FOREWORD

HOW UTTERLY the life of a child in this country has changed during my lifetime I would scarcely believe if I had not seen it happen. Three-quarters of a century have spanned the change: my father was a Civil War veteran; I remember the day we all went down to the store to see my mother make our first call on a telephone; I remember watching the explosive progress of the first automobile down our village street.

Put it this way, as the statistics put it: before 1867, the year I was born, only one out of every six people lived in cities of more than 8,000 inhabitants, and there were only 141 such cities; by 1900, one out of three people lived in such a city, and the number of those cities was 547. (I quote from Leo Huberman's *America, Incorporated.*) Nearly half a century has passed since 1900, and the transition from rural and village life to a big-city industrial civilization is a half-century farther along.

I have seen the world of the child grow smaller and smaller. From the wide wonderful place of my childhood, it has become a narrow cell, walled about with the mysteries of complex machinery and the hazards of a motor-driven urban setting.

When I grew up in Fayetteville, New York, school was not very important to children who could roam the real world freely for their learning. We did not merely stand by while the work of our simpler world was done; I drove the wagon in haying time, sitting on top of the swaying load, all the way to the barn. At ten, my great-aunt used to say, I could turn a team of horses and a wagon in less space than a grown man needed to do it.

No one had to tell us where milk came from, or how butter was made. We helped to harvest wheat, saw it ground into flour in the mill on our own stream; I baked bread for the family at

FOREWORD

thirteen. There was a paper mill, too, on our stream; we could learn the secrets of half a dozen other industries merely by walking through the open door of a neighbor's shop.

No wonder school was a relatively unimportant place—a place where we learned only the mechanical tools, the three R's, and a smattering about things far away and long ago. Our really important learning, the learning how to live in the world into which we were born and how to participate in its work, was right at hand, outside the schoolhouse walls.

This is the change I have seen, from a world in which children could learn as they grew in it, to a world so far beyond the grasp of children, that only the school can present it to them in terms which they can understand, can prepare them with knowledge of it so that they can take their places in it with confidence when the time comes.

This is why, between my eightieth and my eighty-first birthday, I have sat down to tell the story of my own adventure in the teaching of children, an adventure which has absorbed me during an entire lifetime.

I began the adventure innocently enough when at sixteen I became the teacher of a one-room school not far from Fayetteville. It was my great-uncle Homer's idea, possibly born of the neighbors' endorsement, "Carrie was always good with children." I next taught first grade in our village school, and 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.

Nevertheless a neighbor was kind enough to think I had possibilities as a teacher, and to speak to the Dean of Teachers College in New York. Out of this came an offer of a scholarship, which I eagerly accepted.

Two years later I was teaching young women to sew to a line, in the Manual Training shop of the Philadelphia Normal School. It was here, truthfully, that my education really began. Restless as I was under the curriculum imposed upon me by the traditional system of the day, I sought in every direction for guidance

FOREWORD

toward new ways of teaching. I took courses at the University of Pennsylvania, and was fortunate enough to encounter the iconoclast Charles Henderson there. I subscribed for courses from the University of Chicago. My seven years of teaching in Philadelphia became a period of intensive self-education.

Since the day in 1901 when I resigned from the Normal School and went to New York to seek a way of carrying out my own ideas in teaching, my education has been given me at the hands of children themselves. What I know of children I have learned from them. There have been moments when I have felt like Columbus discovering a new continent, and, conversely, many times when the uncharted world of childhood has presented no clear path by which a mere adult could find her way in it.

The story of this exploration into the world of children and their ways of growing and learning is what I have set down here. If it helps some children by making their ways of learning a little clearer to some parents and some teachers, I shall be well content.

C. P.

CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| FOREWORD | xi |
| 1. WHAT IS A SCHOOL? | 3 |
| 2. FIRST EXPERIMENTS | 14 |
| 3. TRIAL FLIGHT | 27 |
| 4. SCHOOL BEGINS | 37 |
| 5. NEW TEACHERS FOR A NEW SCHOOL | 57 |
| 6. WE LEAVE MACDOUGAL ALLEY | 71 |
| 7. SEVENS—A GROWING-UP YEAR | 86 |
| 8. THE EIGHTS TAKE A JOB | 103 |
| 9. MORE JOBS FOR CHILDREN | 122 |
| 10. BOOK-LEARNING HAS ITS TURN | 139 |
| 11. PLAYS—BY AND FOR CHILDREN | 151 |
| 12. DEMOCRACY IN MINIATURE | 167 |
| 13. A TEACHER COOPERATIVE | 181 |
| 14. THE EDUCATION OF PARENTS | 188 |

I LEARN
FROM CHILDREN

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS A SCHOOL?

OFTEN DURING my three decades in the City and Country School I have thought we should have a doctor on hand at all times. Not for the children (we took care of that) but for innocent visitors to our classrooms. Sometimes, emerging from a morning of observation, they have seemed visibly to be suffering from shock!

This was not likely to be true of mothers—a mother more often came away from her first visit with a look of bewildered pleasure. She had watched a group of happy children without always knowing what they were happy about, but for the moment it was enough that they were happy.

Occasionally a father looked jolted, worried; how, in that turmoil, would his son ever get ready for Harvard?

But the sharpest reaction could be counted on to come from the good teacher whose entire life had been spent in a traditional classroom.

“Do you call this a school?” She would ask the question in terms more or less politely veiled depending on how far her principles had been outraged. And I could sympathize with her, having served my time in the kind of classroom where each child sits on a bench nailed to the floor, at a desk as firmly fixed in its place, incommunicado as far as all the other children are concerned—and the teacher at the front of the room sternly bound to maintain the discipline without which, it is assumed, the work will not get done.

I LEARN FROM CHILDREN

I have put such a teacher among, say, our sixth-graders, the Elevens, to share a part of their full and busy day. By contrast to the nailed-down dependability of her own classroom, here nothing was fixed, nothing stayed put, not even the furniture; above all, not the children!

Some would be in the print room, turning out a job. There they were anchored at least to the presses; yet through the wide doorway there would be a constant movement of active young bodies round and round among type cases and stock shelves, with a chatter of voices as continuous as the hum and clatter of the presses. Orders, comments, criticisms, a shouted question to the teacher from the foreman-of-the-week: "We finished the Sevens' reading work—shall we start on the library card order or the Parents' Association letterheads?"

Within the classroom itself there would be no stillness, either visual or auditory. Treble howls of disagreement might be rising from the corner where the editorial committee of the Elevens' magazine, soon going to press, debated the literary merits of a nine-year-old's story—or a Thirteen's, the more sharply criticized because of the author's advanced age. A pig-tailed Eight bounded into the room, her small face solemnly on duty bent, a canvas mail pouch hanging from her shoulders; postman from the Eights' post-office, she carried a Special Delivery letter, an invitation to the Elevens from the Tens to attend a performance of their play in the Gym the next morning. Two Elevens returned, laden with packages of paper, pencils, notebooks, jars of bright paints, supplies bought for the group at the school store run by the Nines. A tall Twelve, splotches of mimeographing ink competing with the freckles on his nose, carried in a stack of copies of *The Yardbird*, weekly newspaper published by his group, to be sold later at 1¢ apiece. (The price, I understand,

WHAT IS A SCHOOL?

has recently risen to 3¢—another case of rising costs of production.)

Half a dozen Elevens might now bang in from work in the science room, the clay room, the shop, and you could tell which, for the marks of their labors would be plain on their worn and stained dungarees. With the new arrivals there would be a shifting of tables and chairs, a foraging in lockers to get out an arithmetic book which needed correcting, a linoleum cut to be finished, a topic—Astronomy in the Middle Ages—to be written up in a notebook. The teacher might be asked, “How much time before Yard?” but rarely, “What shall we do now?” Each child apparently knew what unfinished work he had on hand and promptly applied himself to it. From the class treasurer of the week, pushing a lock of brown hair behind an ear while she worked on her accounts, there might come a piteous wail—“We’ll have to stop losing pencils! If we have to buy pencils again this week we can’t afford the trip to Chinatown!”

And swirling around the visitor’s head, beating against her unaccustomed ears, there was *noise*, until the walls of the room must bulge with it. Of twenty souls in the room, only one was quiet—the teacher.

Of course the visitor was right in her complaint: this did not look or sound like any schoolroom. But it was very much like something else. It was like a segment of grown-up activity, an office, a small factory, or perhaps office and factory combined. Nor did these children look like school children, starched and clean-faced, the boys in white shirts, the girls in crisp frocks. These children wore work-clothes, dungarees or overalls, boys and girls alike (occasionally a dress, the exercise of individual prerogative), and they and their work-clothes bore the evidences of their work. “Do they have to

get so dirty?" mothers have been asking for thirty years. But was there ever a printer without ink on his trousers and his cheek, a cook without flour on her elbows and aprons?

This classroom was a place where work was done. The workers could not be fastened down; they had to come and go about their various jobs, fetch supplies, seek advice, examine, compare, discuss. The work got done, not in proportion to the silence in the room, but in proportion to the responsibility of each worker to his job and to the group. Some were more able, more responsible workers than others—as among adults. And, as among adults, there was a supervisor (not a boss, however) directing, counseling, channeling the abundant energies of these young workers, keeping the balance among personalities, keeping the schedule of the day's program and its constantly varying tasks, checking the accomplishment of both group and individual.

No wonder the visitor was confounded. The movement bewildered her; the noise came between her and the work. But she was the only one in the room who was bewildered. She could not see the pattern, so unlike the traditional one with which she was familiar, so much more complex. Yet it was an obvious and familiar pattern, seen everywhere except in the traditional schoolroom. It was the traditional pattern, rather than this one, which was strange and unfamiliar. This one was the normal pattern of human activity, adult or child. Because these were children, the noise was louder, the movement more explosive. And because these were children, the task of the teacher and her student-teacher assistant was so much more than merely that of a shop foreman or a supervisor in an adult project that here, in truth, the analogy breaks down. This teacher had a task so subtle, so exacting, that a traditionally trained teacher could scarcely hope to comprehend it at a glance.

WHAT IS A SCHOOL?

And if she asked us, as in one way or another she always did, is this a school—we could ask in our turn, *what is a school?*

To answer that a school is a place of learning is no answer at all, but only another way of stating the question. A place of learning what? A place of learning, *how?*

I was seventeen when I taught my first class—a one-room school in the country—and I had had none of the benefits of normal school, teacher training, nor even, possibly, had ever heard the word *pedagogy*. What I did have was a deep conviction, unspoken, indeed unconscious until much later, that a desire to learn was as natural and inevitable in children as the desire to walk in babies.

How could anyone doubt that it was? Once beyond the eating-sleeping stage, every day, every hour of a young child's waking life is devoted to adventure, exploration, discovery of the world around him. His fiercest struggles are to learn—to turn over, to sit up, to walk, to climb; later, to grasp a toy, to shake a rattle, to roll and recapture a ball; still later, to investigate the working of light switches, telephones, clocks. ("Why must he be so *destructive?*" protests the dismayed mother, but our forefathers had to see their houses burned down before they knew how fire worked.) His greatest frustrations, aside from his own limitations, are the restrictions placed upon him by the adult world in his effort to touch, to feel, to see and smell and taste. And his method of learning? The first and best one, the one used by Neanderthal man and by the atomic scientist—trial and error.

No one who has watched a baby return to his lessons day after day—and persist in them despite bumps and bruises—can doubt the drive of the young human being to learn. And indeed if man did not have this compulsion to explore, to understand, and to conquer or at least come to terms with the

I LEARN FROM CHILDREN

world in which he lives, including his own person, he must surely have disappeared from the earth ages ago, along with the millions of other forms of life which have vanished, even the mighty dinosaur.

But something happens, alas, to this great driving force. All but a very few men and women in the world, a few unique beings touched with some kind of genius, have lost the urge to learn.

They lost it, in fact, long before they were grown. They lost it while they were still little children, while they were still spending their days in the place of learning, the school—perhaps that was where they lost it!

A visitor from out of town—not an educator, merely a perceptive and sensitive mother—told me something once which I have never forgotten. She had spent an hour or two in the school, and sat down with me afterward to talk about her own boys, who were pupils at a fine traditional private school.

“When they were six they were so busy, so active, so alive!” she said. “They had so many interests, wanted to do so many things—and did them! Now they are eleven and nine, and it’s all gone. They have no interest, no curiosity, no initiative or imagination or individuality. They might have been turned out in a factory.” I can remember that there were tears in her eyes.

Maybe because circumstances had made me a teacher, and maybe because I was a teacher before I learned the accepted ways to teach—whatever the reason, I was in my twenties when I began to look for the child’s lost desire to learn. It seemed to me that if we could keep this desire alive through childhood and into adult life, we would release a force more precious and powerful for good than any physical force the scientists ever discovered for mankind’s use.

WHAT IS A SCHOOL?

At least, I reasoned, it would make the years of learning, the school years, meaningful. The child would learn in such a way that his knowledge would actually go with him from the schoolroom into the world; his knowledge would become part of him, as the knowledge the infant gains by his own trial and error method becomes part of him.

I had seen fifteen-year-old boys who had been faithfully taught their three R's in the public school struck dumb and helpless when they needed to divide a fifteen-inch board into two halves in the shop. It was only one evidence—but how revealing—of what I had seen again and again, that our teaching had failed to teach, that it had only crammed knowledge like excelsior into unreceptive little heads, knowledge that was unused because it was unusable as we had given it, unrelated, undigested. Most dreadful of all, unwanted.

I once asked a cooking teacher why she did not let the children experiment with the flour and yeast, to see whether they could make bread. She said in a shocked voice, "But that would be so wasteful!"

She was no more shocked by my question than I by her answer. That materials used in education should be considered wasted! Ours must be a strange educational system, I thought. And, of course, the more I studied it, the more convinced I became that it was very strange indeed. It was saving of materials, ah yes—but how wasteful of children!

Once in our school I watched a little girl take sheets of good drawing paper, one by one, from a pile—I counted up to fifty. She made a little mark on each one with a crayon, and threw it away. Fifty sheets of paper wasted, and nobody said, "Don't!" On the contrary, when she stopped and looked fearfully at the teacher, she got a smile and an encouraging, "Try another one." That little girl was in school for the first time, and terrified. She could not speak at all, could not look

I LEARN FROM CHILDREN

at the teacher without shriveling. Those fifty sheets of paper were a beginning for her; she drew, then played with blocks, then answered the child who played beside her on the floor, and in a few weeks she had begun to find her way through the jungle of her own terrors and was learning to be a happy, busy little school girl.

Yes, no doubt we are wasteful of paper and paints and clay and wood and a few pounds of flour and a few cents' worth of yeast. But we try not to waste the child, or his energies, or his time. I have seen time wasted in the traditional classroom, where out of forty children one is reciting, while thirty-nine sit with empty hands, empty faces—and empty heads. I have seen a little boy with his chin in his hand and his eyes on the door, doing nothing, thinking nothing, only waiting with dreadful resignation for the moment when the bell would ring and the door would open, and he could get out of school.

But the child, unhampered, does not waste time. Not a minute of it. He is driven constantly by that little fire burning inside him, to do, to see, to learn. You will not find a child anywhere who will sit still and idle unless he is sick—or in a traditional classroom.

How this unnatural treatment of children came about was not my concern. I would not, even if I could, go into the history of education, a course in which I was an unhappy failure at Teachers College so many years ago. My own education was given me, not in teacher-training courses, not by professors of pedagogy, but by children themselves.

A child playing on his nursery floor, constructing an entire railroad system out of blocks and odd boxes he had salvaged from the wastepaper basket, taught me that the play impulse in children is really a work impulse. Childhood's work is learning, and it is in his play—before he ever gets into the hands of teachers in organized education—that the child

WHAT IS A SCHOOL?

works at his job. No child ever lavished on a history book the energy he poured into a game of cowboys and Indians. But cowboys and Indians are a part of the history of our country which he must learn. What is wrong with learning history by playing it?

Surely the school was at fault, not the child. Was it unreasonable to try to fit the school to the child, rather than—as we were doing with indifferent success—fitting the child to the school?

I sometimes thought, in my rebellious twenties, that the educators had never seen a child. It is one thing to have a child handed you, as the traditional teacher is handed her young charges, at the age of five or six—and then to proceed with him according to the curriculum. But that is not to *see* a child, any more than looking at a lion in a zoo is to see a lion.

To see a child means seeing him in terms of his own horizons, and almost from the day he is born. You see then how the circle of his interest widens outward, like the circles made by a stone thrown into a pond. First he is concerned with his own person—his hands and feet, the motion of his body. Then his mother's face, his crib, his nursery floor, the house in which he lives and the people in it, the milkman and the grocer's boy who deliver his food, the street and the park in which he plays.

Children "play house," and how ill we understand the word "play." They are working in deadly earnest at the job of preparing to be adults, with the most serious of adult responsibilities, that of parenthood. A little girl pinned into a big apron stirs the batter for a cake—a favorite magazine advertisement in full color, favorite because it is quaint. Instead of cooing over her quaintness, we should treat her with respect. She is learning to be a mother in her own kitchen some

day, learning to cook with loving care for the health and enjoyment of her own family.

Again and again in my life of learning from children I have remembered my own childhood, and that eager desire to help grown-ups in grown-up work—only to be given the lowliest and least interesting chores to do. How happily I would have washed the pots and pans, if I had had a hand in the cooking that was done in them! But that would have been wasteful; I might have spilled or spoiled good food. Perhaps it would be wasteful in the home when a limited budget must actually feed the family (although even of this I am not convinced). But a school is a place of learning; what economy have we served if we have wasted the urge to learn?

Children have their own meaning for the word *play*. To them it does not, as it does to adults, carry the ideas of idleness, purposelessness, relaxation from work. When we began our school we had named it a “play school,” as a telegraphic way of saying that in our way of teaching, the children learned by playing. It was the children who made us, early in the school’s history, delete the word from the school’s name. To them it was not a “play school” but a school, and they were working hard at their schooling.

How hard they work, only we who have watched them really know. They do not waste one precious moment. They are going about their jobs all the time. No father in his office or mother in her home works at such a pace. For a long time I was principally afraid that they would exhaust themselves in this strenuous new kind of school.

Every step of the way, I was learning too. I had set myself the task of learning where, in our teaching of children, we were letting the precious desire to learn dribble wastefully away. I was going to find the leak in the dike and put my finger in it. Often it seemed to me that there were too many