Four Women of Chicago

Mothers of Progressive Education and Developers of John Dewey’s Idea

John Dewey is well known for his progressive ideas and was credited by many historians as the father of progressive education, but where are the mothers? Dewey did not develop his ideas in isolation. Four women from Chicago were highly influential in assisting John in initiating and refining his theories. Ella Flagg Young, Jane Addams, Alice Chipman Dewey, and Anna Bryan deserve to be recognized for their contributions as “mothers” of the progressive movement and for their championing social justice issues during the late 19th and early part of the 20th centuries.

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Introduction

John Dewey (1859-1952) spent only 11 years at the University of Chicago (1894-1905). During this short time, many of his ideas and theories were developed at his Laboratory School. “During this experimental period, Dewey developed what was called the instrumental theory of knowledge. He saw ideas as tools, or instruments, for the solution of immediate problems in the environment” (Wolfe, 2000, p. 174). Of course Dewey’s years in Chicago were not spent in isolation. His ideas and theories were strongly influenced by four progressive women who have been marginalized in the educational literature. Learning about these women is crucial for graduate students/teachers to expand their social justice perspectives and enliven their civic competence. These women are Ella Flagg Young, Jane Addams, Alice Chipman Dewey, and Anna Bryan. The pur-
pose of this article is to describe their contributions to education in general, and Dewey’s progressive ideas in particular.

**Ella Flagg Young (1845-1918)**

Let’s think about the following scenario.

In a graduate course on the history of education an education professor asks her students, “Who was the first woman president of the National Education Association?” Students respond with that “deer in the headlights” look.

“OK then. The answer is Ella Flagg Young. Has anybody heard of her?” No answer. Why haven’t they heard of Dr. Young? She worked closely with Dewey. She contributed to and refined his educational ideas. She even explained to Dewey what his ideas meant. Dewey said of Ella Flagg Young, “She 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).

Most teacher education students have never heard of Ella Flagg Young and most will not ever hear of her in their undergraduate or graduate professional education studies. Ms. Young was influential in helping John Dewey develop and implement his ideas. She “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). Jackie M. Blount (2002) explains that many of Dewey’s educational ideas were actually taken from Young. What Dewey lacked in experience with children, Ella Flagg Young compensated. She had the practical experience of an administrator and teacher and when Dewey needed someone to refine his ideas, Ms. Young was who he consulted.

In 1900, Ella completed her Ph.D. at the age of 55. Her dissertation was entitled, *Isolation in the School* which was later published by the University of Chicago Press (1901) (Blount, 2002). Young’s discussion section of her dissertation is as current today as it was in 1900. Some of her conclusions could easily be mistaken for comments about the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the rigidity of public schools we are experiencing in the 21st century. 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 increasingly making all of the decisions for those “who were lower in the increasingly hierarchical structure” (p. 171). During Young’s day, obedience and uniformity of both teachers and students were demanded. Young, however, believed that teachers and students should be allowed far more autonomy than they were permitted (Wolfe, 2000).

Beyond her writings which reflect the current trends in education today, Young made other significant advances in education and for women in general. She was the first woman superintendent of the Chicago City Schools and one of the first presidents of the National Education Association (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000). Both of these positions were groundbreaking, not only for Dr. Young but for women in general. Needless to say, many of the men did not like this. On several occasions the men of the Chicago Board of Education sought to remove her from her superintendent’s position. “Clearly, the Chicago School Board included a number of members who either strongly preferred male candidates or who otherwise believed women should not hold such positions” (Blount, 2002, p. 167). On each of the occasions, when board members sought to remove Dr. Young as superintendent, an assembly of women came to her rescue. One of her strongest supporters was Jane Ad-
dams, the social and political activist who ran Chicago’s Hull House.

Ella Flagg Young’s contributions to education in general, and progressive education in particular, should be recognized and brought out of the margins. In review, some of her greatest contributions included:

- her research and writings about schools, especially *Isolation in the School*
- her pioneering work as the first woman superintendent of the Chicago Schools
- her experience as the first woman president of the National Education Association
- her profound influence on John Dewey and his ideas

Clearly, Ella Flagg Young had an impact on progressive education, the development of John Dewey’s ideas, and social justice education through her practical experience and her emphasis on autonomy and cooperation.

**Jane Addams (1860-1935)**

Let’s consider another scenario.

Jane Addams and her colleagues are at Hull House in Chicago, working daily as advocates of children and families of poverty. John Dewey often visits with Jane. She tells Dewey how important teachers are in the development of children and families who live in poverty. “She encourages him to be more pragmatic and descend from the ivory academic tower” (Wolfe, 2000, p. 181).

Jane Addams was the best known of all of the progressive women. In the early 1900s she actually was the most famous woman in the United States (Elshtain, 2002). But who was Jane Addams and why are her contributions less known today?

Jane Addams was the founder of Hull House in Chicago, Illinois in 1889, along with Ellen Gates Starr, a friend from Jane’s college days. Hull House had the distinguished honor of being the first settlement house in North America. Funding for Hull House came from Jane’s inheritance of $50,000 when her father died. Jane and Ellen became the first residents. “The doors of Hull House, once they opened September 18, 1889, were always open. Jane Addams often greeted visitors herself” (Elshtain, 2002, p. 37). Over time, the Hull House became a comprehensive educational and social welfare facility, as well as a boarding facility for women. Some of the services and entities Hull House provided were:

- drama classes and groups
- a library
- a book bindery
- kindergarten classes
- a public kitchen
- a gymnasium
- a tea or coffee house
- an art gallery
- clubs for children
- night school for adults
[adapted from Elshtain, 2002]

While Addams also was the most comprehensive progressive educator of her day, she is most noted for her work in child and family advocacy. Jean Elshtain (2002) writes:

Addams was preoccupied with the fears and hopes of children; their nighttime terrors and daydreams; their escapades that may turn deadly; the arduous labor they are forced into that might kill their spirits, in contrast to forms of play and work that would unlock their longing for what is good and beautiful and true and steer them away.
from the tawdry, salacious, and the morally lax. (p. 121)

Addams personally made numerous contributions to child and family welfare. Some of the fruits of her advocacy included the advent of a domestic relations court and a juvenile court, the enforcement of a ten hour work day, and a pension for mothers (Elshtain, 2002). Jane also inspired others to make great contributions for child advocacy.

Drawn to Jane Addams’s experiment, Florence Kelley, who later became a significant force in the history of American reform, was a resident at Hull House before going on to become a leading crusader against child labor and the first Illinois Factory Inspector (Elshtain, 2002, p. 38).

Jane took her concerns for children and families into politics. Perhaps the best example of her political activity comes from the 1912 presidential election. During the Republican Convention she “had been frustrated by her appearance before the platform committee … where her efforts to push woman’s suffrage onto the agenda were ignored” (Elshtain, 2002, p. 191). Shortly after the convention the party split and in August of that year Addams was on the platform committee of the newly formed Progressive Party.

It was a time for women to speak up. It was time for the party to pledge itself to the protection of children, to the care of the aged, to the relief of overworked girls, to the safeguarding of burdened men (Elshtain, 2002, p. 192).

Addams worked for the Progressive Party to elect Theodore Roosevelt. She became so popular during this time that many thought of nominating her for President of the United States. At the time this was particularly amaz-
her help in the establishment of the first juvenile court
- her work for international women’s suffrage
- her work as a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union
- her work as president of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom
- her support and encouragement of other women educators such as Ella Flagg Young

Jane was a pioneer of progressive ideas and social justice at the macro level. Hull House social programs continue well into the 21st century and many of the ideas developed by Addams are still in existence.

**Alice Chipman Dewey (1858-1927)**

Let’s think about a third scenario.

At any university in the Western hemisphere, somewhere faculty and students in a social studies class are discussing John Dewey. At some point, students will learn that John Dewey established and headed a laboratory school at the University of Chicago. He was in charge of the curriculum. This curriculum reflected his ideas as a founding father of progressive education. Students will learn these facts and spit them back on a test and, over time, may not remember too much about John Dewey besides his name. It is most certain, however, that the vast majority of them will have never heard of Alice Chipman Dewey, much less the fact that everything that was said about Dewey, with the exception of being a father of progressivism, also should be attributed to Alice Chipman Dewey as well.

Alice Chipman was a teacher, social activist, and student of philosophy at the University of Michigan before John Dewey even arrived at the university (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000). When Dewey began teaching there, Alice took classes from John and they eventually married. In some circles, Alice’s work, even as a student at the University of Michigan became as well known as John’s. She was instrumental in forming a new sorority, establishing a women’s reading room, and was moderately successful at bringing John down from his ivory tower mentality to consider the practical aspects of education (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000).

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. According to Jennifer Wolfe (2000), 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 (p. 181).

To John’s credit, he gave Alice recognition for many of his ideas — especially for taking some of them and bringing them to the classrooms of children and adolescents. Still, very few sources give Alice credit for her part in the University of Chicago Laboratory School and its curriculum (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000). The Deweys jointly wrote one book entitled, *Letters from China and Japan* (1920). John is listed as the lead author.

As with other women educators who are marginalized, many of the contributions made by Alice Dewey have been forgotten. Some of her more salient achievements included:
either the source, inspiration or innovator of many of the progressive ideas attributed to John Dewey

- her social activism for children’s, women’s, and African American education
- her grass roots efforts to form the National Women’s Suffrage Association
- her discussions with women of China and Japan to inspire activism and educational reform

Anna Bryan (1858-1901)

Let’s think about one more scenario.

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. Most kindergartens followed a Froebelian curriculum. Newer ideas that were fore-runners of today’s developmentally appropriate practice were common in many of Chicago’s kindergartens. While John Dewey is often credited with this, someone else led the way. Her name was Anna Bryan.

Anna Bryan eventually returned to Chicago to become the principal of the Kindergarten Normal Department of Armour Institute. While at the Institute, Anna collaborated and influenced the thinking of Francis W. Parker and John Dewey. The establishment of the kindergarten at the Laboratory School and at schools throughout Chicago was one of her greatest contributions. She also influenced G. Stanley Hall’s work by interpreting the findings of the Child Study Movement for kindergarten educators (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000).

Some of the most salient contributions of Anna Bryan to education, and particularly early childhood education included:

- her pioneering work in early childhood curriculum at both the Free Kindergarten Association in Louisville, Kentucky and throughout the city of Chicago
- her development of progressive ideas in early childhood education that served as a paradigm shift from Froebelian ideas toward today’s developmentally appropriate practice
- her ability to inspire and guide others as kindergarten teachers and teacher educators, including Patty Smith Hill
- her ability to influence the thinking about early childhood curriculum of the dominant male educators of her day, including G. Stanley Hall, Francis Parker, and John Dewey
- her work in starting many of the progressive kindergartens in Louisville, Chicago, and beyond
- her leadership through the International Kindergarten Union (now the Association for Childhood Education International) through the child study committee and through the committee on teacher education

Anna Bryan, from Louisville, Kentucky was a graduate of the Chicago Free Kindergarten Association. After completing her coursework, Anna’s first job as a kindergarten teacher was at the Marie Chapel Charity Kindergarten. Later she returned to Louisville to become the leader at a new training school for kindergarten teachers. Patty Smith Hill was one of Anna’s first graduates. Ms. Hill was immediately employed at the school (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000). Hill later became a leading figure in the kindergarten movement (Wolfe, 2000).
Conclusion

Besides these four women pioneers of Chicago, there were numerous other women throughout the United States and beyond who helped develop, refine, or extend John Dewey’s works. Some of these notable women include Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Caroline Pratt, Patty Smith Hill, and Marietta Johnson. The Laboratory School, under John Dewey’s leadership endured only a few years. Progressive schools started by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Caroline Pratt and Marietta Johnson, however, are still in thriving well into the 21st century. These historical legacies, along with Ella Flagg Young, Jane Addams, Alice Chipman Dewey, and Anna Bryan have either been marginalized in the educational literature or attributed to Dewey (Aldridge, Christensen, Cowles, & Kohler, 2009). It is time to recognize and include the valuable contributions of these heroines in mainstream courses, especially graduate social studies and historical foundations of education, social justice, critical pedagogy, and in periodicals and texts. If these women are continually excluded from historical, social, and moral curriculum, students will continue to lose powerful, transformative, and brilliant role models of moral social justice.

References


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