



*Midwives of Progressive Education The Bureau of Educational Experiments
1916 - 1919*
J.F. Staring

SUMMARY

Midwives of Progressive Education The Bureau of Educational Experiments 1916 – 1919

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In the *Introduction* to this dissertation, I briefly review an early twenty-first-century school war in the Netherlands over *Nieuwe Leren* (New Learning) educational methods. In February 2008, the Dutch Parliamentary Commission on Educational Reforms report, *Tijd voor Onderwijs* (Time for Education), abruptly settled the school war — not in favour of *Nieuwe Leren*. During the height of the conflict between 2005 and 2008, advocates and critics made infrequent cursory reference to *New Education*, that is, to closely related educational reform initiatives that took place in the United States from 1890 to 1919. However, neither advocates nor opponents exhausted exploration of the history and effectiveness of these American initiatives, nor to the relevance to Dutch *Nieuwe Leren*. The omission reinforced both supporters and opponents' positions that the Dutch school war only concerned a typical Dutch exchange of views about education reform implemented since the start of the millennium. This thesis sheds direct new light on the early twentieth-century American educational reform initiatives, and indirectly on its relevance to *Nieuwe Leren*.

Marietta Johnson and Caroline Pratt were key figures in the experimental, innovative early twentieth-century American education reform initiatives closely related to *Nieuwe Leren*. They were members of the Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE) in New York City. Research into the careers of both educational reformers and BEE archives yielded the insight that the Bureau was far more influential — and played a much greater role in the history of progressive education and professionalization of educational innovators — than usually depicted in histories of the era.

These considerations led to the following central research question of the thesis:

What was the role played by the Bureau of Educational Experiments and its members in the history of progressive education between 1916 and 1919?

In *Chapter 1*, I argue that during the Progressive Era, that is, between 1890 and 1919, there was *no* national movement for progressive education in the United States. Certainly, local grassroots educational reform initiatives flourished — created by, among others, social settlement workers, parent associations, and civic groups. In the first part of this chapter, I discuss representative reform initiatives, especially those in New York City. It was instructive to learn that a number of the same women — that is, Caroline Pratt and her circle of activist, grassroots reformer colleagues — appear repeatedly, in differing settings. However, national and local social and political factors thwarted several educational organizations that were emerging during the Progressive Era from becoming national organizations for educational reorganization. For instance, to combat overcrowding and congested inner-city public schools, in 1916, educational reformers founded the Gary School League to advocate implementing the Gary plan in New York City. In the autumn of 1917, however, the loss of a mayoral election by a key political supporter, *not* failings of the New York City progressive reformers embracing the Gary Plan, led to the demise of the approach that progressive

reformers embraced. This signaled the end of the so-called 'Gary School War,' which also brought to an end the Gary School League. The local loss stifled a possible further development of a national movement for such change. This particular conflict also demonstrated that parents and community leaders needed voice in education reform efforts and organizations. Another example emphasized is that Federal government repression of educators (and others) who had opposed the 1917 entry of the United States in World War I had an added suppressive impact on educational renewal in 1917 and 1918, especially in New York City. Yet, it did not dull the spirit of reformers. Only two-and-a-half months after the November 1918 armistice, essentially those same reformers aided to establish a national organization to professionalize progressive teachers — the Progressive Education Association (PEA). This association also acted as a clearinghouse, propagated learning by projects, learning by activities, and *protoprofessionalized* parents and interested laypersons. The second part of the chapter outlines these processes between 1919 and the early 1930s when disputes about social reconstruction through education began to politicize debates within the Association, in the long run leading to the demise of the PEA in 1954. The synopsis of the chapter points to a gap in the body of knowledge that exists for the period ending World War I.

In *Chapters 2 and 3*, I outline parallel developments in the meandering careers of Marietta Johnson and Caroline Pratt, two women who became members of the Bureau of Educational Experiments. Around 1919, they would become essential links in the establishment of the PEA and the formulation of its mission. Both women received a Protestant religious education in small towns in rural surroundings. Both women became teacher in rural schools. Both also taught prospective teachers at Normal Schools.

Johnson experienced an existential crisis that she attributed to her founding an experimental coeducational rural school in a Georgist utopian colony in Fairhope, Alabama, ten years later. She presented herself as a reformer committed to bringing about a metamorphosis in kindergarten, primary and secondary education. Constantly struggling meeting the school's budget since 1912, she toured the country raising the needed funds by delivering lectures, thereby extending her social network while almost developing into a prophet of educational renewal.

After a like professional career crisis, before she founded an experimental co-educational school in New York City, Pratt first worked as a textile industry researcher, carpentry teacher, social worker at a settlement house, political activist, and toy manufacturer. She openly identified herself as a member of the Socialist Party and cherished her goal of improving society by her teaching.

Johnson and Pratt both advocated manual training, learning by activities, and integration of social sciences and the arts into one interconnected curriculum teaching the three R's. They promoted field trips for the children as part of their educational programmes, Johnson in rural areas, Pratt in inner-city conditions. Both women became members of the Bureau of Educational Experiments, Pratt at its inception in 1916, Johnson a year later.

In *Chapter 4*, I describe the early history of the Bureau of Educational Experiments and the founding of the Progressive Education Association. Between 1916 and 1919, Bureau members had no clear initial direction. On the one hand, they presented the BEE as a clearing house. Bureau members collected and distributed educational information, organized exhibitions, published bulletins, and maintained an extensive library. As the BEE, they professionalized the professional public while *protoprofessionalizing* the general public. As well, through the BEE, they subsidized, initiated, and supervised a series of educational experiments. Bureau members held great expectations regarding the benefits of psychological testing of school children, but these expectations were not met. Before they finally found their direction in 1919, by opening two associated laboratory schools as the new core of the

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organization, Bureau members scored some successes — and several failures. In the spring of 1917, parallel to the U.S. entry into World War I, they evaluated their progress and formulated new priorities. The evaluation led, among other things, to contracting of Marietta Johnson to supervise a demonstration class on ‘Organic Education’ at Public School 95. In 1917, Johnson also became a member of the Bureau.

A striking but unintentional success of the Bureau of Educational Experiments concerns its impact on the founding of the Progressive Education Association. In the fall of 1918, on the one hand, Johnson and several kindred spirits further developed the plan to set up a national organization for progressive education first brought forward by a Bureau hired researcher during an early 1918 Bureau meeting. When the Progressive Education Association was founded in 1919, Johnson and Pratt were among those members who formulated its provisional objectives. On the other hand, in addition, members of the Bureau published regularly and preferably in *Progressive Education*, the journal issued by the PEA since 1924. Reciprocally, the formation of the PEA helped Pratt and her Bureau colleagues restructure the BEE organization and focus on small-scale research priorities to grow into a kind of *forerunner* action research institute. After 1930, the Bureau became a teacher training institute, essentially, a progressive Normal School.

The concluding section of the chapter summarizes the dissertation; I describe its focus on a women-led network of reformers, and I indicate how the findings pertain to recommendations made by the Dutch Parliamentary Commission on Educational Reforms in their 2008 report *Tijd voor Onderwijs*.

In the *Epilogue*, I recount the *post*-1919 lives of Marietta Johnson and Caroline Pratt. After the establishment of the PEA early in 1919, and the death of her husband in the summer of that year, Johnson resumed her energetic *pre*-Bureau wanderlust life, delivering lectures in many U.S. states, ostensibly to balance the budget of her Fairhope School of Organic Education. Though she enjoyed national and even international fame, it seems she did not manage her school adequately — frequent absences certainly did not help. Enrollement fell steadily; an article even commented her regular absence from the school and the negative impact this had on the school’s curriculum and organization. In 1924, Johnson mortgaged the school for thousands of dollars. A book she published in 1929 was not well received; during the 1930s until her death in 1938, she and her school slowly slid into oblivion.

In contrast, during the 1920s, Pratt was busy strengthening her school’s curriculum by introducing a jobs program and shaping the curriculum around the use of *Unit Blocks* designed by her. In 1929, the school severed from the Bureau of Educational Experiments. During the mid- and late-1930s, Pratt established a temporary alliance with other experimental schools to cope with financial consequences of the Great Depression. She also ‘exported’ the City and Country School curriculum concept to other, public, schools in New York. Pratt retired in 1945. She died in 1954.