

What Jane Addams Tells Us about Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Jane Addams was a social reformer and one of the founders of the field of sociology. She worked to create better working conditions for immigrants, for the control of disease and the development of public health, in the areas of multicultural understanding and peace activism. What she accomplished and wrote about during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Chicago stands as a model for how to infuse democracy throughout every aspect of life. Although Addams is not usually classified as a progressive educator, we can draw insights from her work that are relevant to progressive education a century later. This chapter focuses on the implications for the area of early childhood education. If we were to list the major innovators in that field, we might find Fröbel, Pestalozzi, Montessori, or Steiner, but not Addams; her work had a much larger scope. Yet remarkably, and precisely because of that scope, her work speaks directly to the practical issues of early childhood education today. A similar case could be made for other aspects of education.

WHAT JANE ADDAMS TELLS US ABOUT EARLY CHILD EDUCATION

“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain, is floating in mid-air, until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life” (Addams, 1990, p. 113).

If we were to list the major innovators in the field of early childhood education, we would not expect to find the name of Jane Addams. She is not even identified as an educator per se. No early childhood program is associated with her name, in contrast to Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Fröbel, Maria Montessori, or Rudolf Steiner. Those who are most familiar with Addams's work might characterize her as a social worker or perhaps as one of the founders of the field of sociology. They might point to her efforts to create better working conditions, her work aimed at the control of disease and the development of public health, her accomplishments in the areas of multicultural understanding and peace activism. However, what Jane Addams achieved and wrote about during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Chicago stands as a model for how to think about early childhood education throughout the world today. The insights that we can draw from her work are more, rather than less, relevant to our own situation.

TRACING THE INFLUENCES FOR ADDAMS'S ACTIVISM

Laura Jane Addams was born in Cedarville, Illinois, on September 6, 1860. Addams enjoyed the material advantage of being the daughter of a politician and successful businessman who owned timber, cattle, farms, flour and timber mills, and a woolen factory. Although her father was no feminist, he did desire higher education for his daughter and sent her to an all-women's institution, Rockford Seminary, where she blossomed as an intellectual and as a social leader.

When she was 7 years old, her father had business at one of his mills in Freeport, adjacent to the poorest section of town. Jane saw rows of run-down houses crowded together, with children dressed in ragged, dirty clothing playing in the streets. She asked her father:

Jane: Papa, why do these people live in such horrid little houses so close together?

Papa: Because they have no money to live in better places.

Jane: Well, when I grow up, I shall live in a big house. But it will not be built among the other large houses, but right in the midst of horrid little houses like these. (Addams, 1990; Segal, n.d.)

These sentiments were reinforced by her experience of the events of her time. The American Civil War during her early years had highlighted the tragedy of violence, slavery, and the inability to understand others. Darwin's *Origin of the Species* became widely influential, suggesting progressive development in human social life as well as in biology.

As a woman, Addams's prospects after college were limited. Her frustration at not being able to employ her considerable talents led to a decade-long malaise. But on a visit to London, Addams met Canon Barnett. He was a social reformer who in 1884 helped establish the first university settlement. That settlement, Toynbee Hall, was a place where wealthy students would live alongside, learn about, and contribute to the welfare of poor people in a collaborative way, as Barnett said, "to learn as much as to teach; to receive as much to give" (Geoghegan, n.d.). Addams was inspired by Toynbee Hall and devised a scheme to replicate the settlement idea in the United States (Addams, 1990, p. 53).

In the late 19th century, immigrants from around the world were pouring into the United States. They fled persecution and poverty, seeking a new life with opportunities for education and work. They came by the millions from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, often with little more than the clothes they wore. The 1890 census showed that of Chicago's 1.1 million people, 855,000 were either foreign born or their U.S.-born children. If anything, foreign-born residents were undercounted, so perhaps fewer than 10% of the people in Chicago at that time were U.S.-born adults (Holli, 2003).

The immigrants had hopes for a better life, and eventually most of them succeeded, not only for themselves but also as vital contributors to the building of the young nation. However, at the outset, their circumstances were often challenging. They faced difficult working conditions in the new factories, disease in the crowded cities, alcohol and cocaine abuse, ethnic discrimination, and violence. Illiteracy and lack of knowledge about social conditions confounded attempts to alleviate the other problems.

Addams enlisted the aid of a college friend, Ellen Gates Starr. They embraced the ideals of progressivism, choosing to reside in the community to learn from and work with marginalized members of society. In 1889, they started Hull-House on the south side of Chicago (Addams, 1930, 1990). Hull-House offered a place for immigrants to live, a community, and an organization that could address social problems. It engaged the new citizens not simply as recipients of services but as participants in creating both Hull-House and a new life in the U.S. (Bruce, 2008).

Settlement workers, who were mostly women, came to live among the immigrants. Hull-House quickly became an incubator for new social programs. The list of those projects is astounding, including the first little theatre, juvenile court, and citizenship-preparation classes in the United States, as well as the first playground, gymnasium, public swimming pool, and public kitchen in Chicago ("Hull-House Firsts," 2001). Hull-House residents organized labor unions, a labor museum, tenement codes, factory laws, child labor laws, adult education courses, and cultural exchange groups. They collected demographic data and turned it into an early version of geographic information systems to enable scientific approaches to counteracting the spread of disease, infant mortality, and substance abuse, as well as to ensure

equitable treatment of citizens by municipal authorities. Hull-House thus became an excellent example of community inquiry (Bruce & Bishop, 2007).

Hull-House became the best-known settlement house in the United States and the leader of nearly 500 settlements nationally by 1920. Women from all over the U.S. came to live and work there. Reflective analysis of the Hull-House work became a hallmark of Addams's writing. She was a popular author and sought-after public speaker. Over time, she extended her analysis to issues of race, education, and world peace, but local experiences were always a springboard for political theorizing. Addams was a co-founder of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. After World War I broke out in Europe, she became an outspoken pacifist and refused to endorse the war or the U.S. entry into it. Although initially criticized as being unpatriotic, she was ultimately praised. In 1931, she became the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Jane Addams left an intellectual and activist legacy that is only now being fully appreciated.

THEORETICAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS

Addams is usually considered to be a *pragmatist* alongside Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, William James, and George Herbert Mead (Shields, 2006, 2009). Unfortunately, the word *pragmatist* can be confusing. In English today, it often means simply doing what is effective or expedient. The pragmatists of Addams's time were concerned with being practical, but much beyond that. They saw the value of creating a robust democracy and the importance of education that engaged the student's experience. They emphasized action in the real world over abstractions, especially those that lead to needless conflict. They asked to consider the consequences of any belief not in terms of material gain but in terms of its implications for individual and societal growth. Addams is unique among the famous pragmatists in actually carrying out the philosophy.

Dewey visited Hull-House shortly after it opened and assigned Addams's books in his courses. They worked together personally and politically. Dewey credited Addams with developing many of his important ideas, including his views on education, democracy, and philosophy itself (Schlipp, 1951). From Mead, Addams learned an approach to social inquiry that emphasizes how symbols create meaning in society (*social interactionism*). Mead's work on development through play influenced Addams as well. They worked on pro-labor speeches, peace advocacy, and the Progressive Party. She was also a friend of James, a pragmatist with a vision of urban improvement. They both valued lived experience and the use of tangible examples, developing universal aspirations out of concrete realities (Cremin, 1959).

Addams read widely and drew from many sources. She was influenced by John Ruskin's ideas that art and culture reflected the moral health of society. Thus, our aesthetic sense helps us understand the plight of the oppressed. As Addams (1930) wrote, "Social life and art have always seemed to go best at Hull-House" (p. 354). She met Leo Tolstoy, who valued solidarity with the common laborer, and emphasized work for and with ordinary people. She was also inspired by his opposition to war.

Perhaps most significantly, Addams strove to not present herself as the great individual hero that many of today's people would consider her to be. She believed that no one achieves great progress alone. Collective action was not only more effective, it was also essential to achieve democratic ends by democratic means. Her work needs to be understood in the context of the women of Hull-House who lived, worked, and learned together. They saw that their efforts in diverse areas would be more effective when linked (Deegan, 1988b; Stebner, 1997).

For example, Florence Kelley helped Addams understand that economic class position could not be ignored in the effort to effect social improvement. Unfettered capitalist greed was the primary cause of misery. This insight led Kelley to work for changes in laws. In order to make the case for those changes, they needed data, which led to pioneering social science research ("Residents of Hull-House," 1970). Kelley's influence also helped Addams expand beyond a charity model, to understand the necessity of working for legal and political change along with helping the poor deal with the consequences of their oppression.

W. E. B. Du Bois, a great American sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist, also interacted with the women who worked in the social settlements. He helped to extend their work to consider the pernicious effects of racism, which they had ignored in the early years. He, Ida B. Wells, Florence Kelley, and others cofounded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, with the support of Addams and others at Hull House.

MAKING THE ENTIRE SOCIAL ORGANISM DEMOCRATIC

Addams understood democracy as a form of socially engaged living and as a framework for social morality. Authentic social advancement should be democratic, not just narrowly reserved for the privileged or used to justify the existing social order. Addams argued that fostering the moral relations necessary for a robust democracy required community members to develop "sympathetic knowledge," an approach to learning about one another for the purpose of caring for and acting on one another's behalf. This larger vision guided all of the projects at Hull-House, from advocacy of better working conditions in the factories to art activities for 3-year-olds. One could make a long list of the lessons of Hull-House for education today, but a half dozen stand out.

Respect Diversity in All Its Forms

The neighbors and clients of Hull-House came initially from Europe but eventually from all over the world. They represented many languages, ethnicities, religions, nationalities, and ways of life. Rather than seeing this diversity as a problem, Addams saw it first as a reality that had to be understood and later as a resource. People were asked to share their arts and music with one another. They taught classes based on their own experiences and cultural backgrounds. For children, growing up among others from around the world was seen as a positive experience, one small part of the larger effort at world peace and justice.

For early childhood education today, Addams would seek ways to value and build upon the knowledge that children bring to the classroom. She would recognize the value of contemporary approaches such as *persona dolls*, which children can use to play roles as people with different characteristics, in order to foster tolerance and understanding. However, she would also ask how the early childhood experiences could be connected more directly to community life through interactions with parents and others in the community. She would see the project of promoting tolerance as one that must be addressed beyond as well as within the classroom.



Fig. 1. Children playing at Hull House (Kirkland, around 1900).

Conceive of Early Childhood Education as Part of the Larger Social Organism

In the course of her work, Addams (2002) emphasized the duties as well as the rights of citizenship. She argued that democracy must be extended “beyond its political expression” to make “the entire social organism democratic” (Addams, 1990, p. 15). This means that every activity must be understood in its relation to the whole. Addams learned that education for children could never succeed if the children were hungry or abused, if their parents had to work 12 to 14 hours a day, or if disease was rampant in the community. Accordingly, early childhood education was only a piece, albeit a vital one, in the nurturing of a healthy social organism. Colleagues such as Florence Kelley fighting for decent working conditions and Alice Hamilton striving to establish public health were as much a part of early childhood education as the teacher working directly with children (Tichi, 2011).

Resist the Market Definition of Childhood

Addams saw that the immigrant young people of her day were exploited as workers, much as we see in sweatshops in many places today. They were also seen as consumers to be deprived of what little money they managed to earn. In both senses, they were simply tools of the burgeoning industrial capitalism, which organized the youth very effectively for those purposes. When the young people had precious little time for play, they were susceptible to further exploitation through a culture that encouraged drug and alcohol abuse, violence, crime, and other anti-social actions. Over time, the young people began to be seen as the source of social pathology, not the victims of it, much as they are today.

Addams (1909) asked why there couldn't be as much attention paid to organizing for play as for work: “This stupid experiment of organizing work and failing to organize play has, of course, brought about a fine revenge” (p. 6). Why couldn't the society support music, arts, sports, learning, nature exploration, and other constructive activities? She recognized the allure of sex and the social importance of street gangs for young people but asked how to direct those energies in positive ways. Although the youngest children might be partially separated from the direct impact of capitalism, they too were affected by its pressures on their families and on the ways that childhood was understood.

Today we see that same pressure in the drive to push formal education on ever-younger children, for example learning to read at 4 so as to be ahead of the others in kindergarten. Addams was an advocate for learning in multiple forms, but she would never have endorsed the obsession with academic and career readiness that pervades education at all levels today. She would also ask about what was being lost—learning to understand and respect difference; to work well with

others; to appreciate music, arts, and literature; to develop a critical understanding of society; to become socially responsible.

Everyone Has a Role to Play

Care for children was not simply a necessity required by the parents' long working hours. Nor was it an activity peripheral to the main concerns of modern life. Instead, it was an integral element in the larger social organism, something that is mutually constituted with other social activities. This perspective is crucial for understanding the insights that we can draw from her work. Rather than seeing children simply as clients to be served, the Hull-House approach saw them as citizens who could contribute to the greater good. They, their parents, and their family and friends were collaborators in learning and helping one another.

Addams resisted any sense of superiority in settlement work. She sought strategies for assisting rather than a charity model of simply providing food and assistance to the poor. She thus went well beyond what might today be called service learning toward a fully collaborative model (Bishop, Bruce, & Jeong, 2009). As Addams (2002) wrote:

We have learned to say that the good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or class; but we have not yet learned to add to that statement, that unless all [people] and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having. (p. 220)

An anecdote from a contemporary project makes this point. In the daycare center for the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago, there is no outdoor area where the children can play safely. But whenever possible, the teacher takes the children out onto the crowded, urban sidewalks. Along the way, they may visit Mrs. Rodriguez, an invalid in a second-floor apartment, who has been told that they are coming. Mrs. Rodriguez goes to the window to see the children and asks them to sing the alphabet song, because she knows that her work in the community includes helping the children develop literacy. The children gladly comply, because they believe that their work includes cheering up Mrs. Rodriguez (Bruce, 2008). Mutual assistance of this kind was a hallmark of Hull-House.

Develop the Imagination and the Arts

The role of aesthetics at Hull-House and in the lives of the children there was complex. Some activities positioned art as a constructive activity to aim towards the ideals of human life, others as a means to soften the harshness of urban life, others still as a means to challenge the social order. Musgrave (2007) noted the

epistemologically integral role of the arts in Addams's work aimed at building *cosmopolitan affection* and global citizenship. The arts engagement practices of Hull-House show how *moral imagination* can be facilitated through the arts.



Fig. 2. Art class at Hull House (Kirkland, around 1924).

Starr and Addams differed in their views of art and themselves changed their opinions over the years (Stankiewicz, 1989). But personal accounts and Wallace Kirkland's wonderful photographs, indeed his very presence, show that art was always integral to developing the social organism, not simply an add-on to other activities. Whatever its role, art was seen as a crucial part of the Hull-House experiment. Material conditions, such as public health, safe working conditions, decent housing, and so on were of course essential, but Addams (1895) emphasized that people were always more than their material conditions implied:

The attempt of Hull-House to make the aesthetic and artistic a vital influence in the lives of its neighbors, and a matter of permanent interest to them, inevitably took the form of a many-sided experiment ... The first furnishings of Hull-House were therefore pictures. (p. 614)

Continual Learning

Addams rejected the idea of Hull-House as a laboratory for social scientific investigation. Nevertheless, she described the work as experimental, trying different approaches until some solution could be found. She viewed experimental improvement of social conditions as epistemologically superior to the laboratory experiment as well as being more morally acceptable (Gross, 2009). New projects and ideas were continually being developed. There was never a sense of a method having been perfected and needing only to be applied.

The assistance that Hull-House provided was premised on developing knowledge about social conditions and data to analyze them. This approach was evident in the work on the Hull-House maps that were used to examine demographic data, sweatshops, child labor, and the spread of disease (“Residents of Hull-House,” 1970). Epistemological concerns were always interlaced with moral ones. It was essential to collect and use data in a responsible manner. Moreover, the questions that were asked always grew out of concerns for improving the social order.

Most notably, Addams is unusual among major thinkers and doers in being open about changes to her own ideas. She believed in continual learning for everyone, including young children, their teachers, administrators, policy makers, and citizens in general. No idea could be judged as valid unless it made a concrete difference in people’s lives. Moreover, what might work today needs to be revisited tomorrow. This ever-evolving nature of her works is one reason her ideas did not get encoded into a named method.

Addams changed her own ideas in several ways. From work with immigrants following many different religions, she shifted from a Protestant Christian spirituality to one that recognized the diverse beliefs of Hull-House neighbors, including Eastern and Western Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. From work with Florence Kelley, she came to a more critical stance towards industrial capitalism. W. E. B. Du Bois, and the horror of the 1908 Springfield, Illinois, race riots, showed her the importance of combatting racism. The tragedy of World War I, which she had opposed, only strengthened her adherence to pacifism, a position she shared with Gandhi. In these and other ways, she showed that the process of working with others and of helping children to learn must be an organic one. It could not be the application of some formula, no matter how well designed, but instead a process in which ideas evolve in response to changing circumstances and the capacity of all involved to grow.

HOW ARE ADDAMS’S IDEAS APPLIED?

There are no early childhood programs specifically identifiable as embodying the Jane Addams “method.” She never formalized her approach in a way that could

be easily replicated. Her recognition of the continual evolution of ideas and the need for learning from all participants implies that there could not be a fixed, easily defined method. Moreover, her emphasis on context means that no individual classroom or school could fully capture what she saw as most important, the situation of early childhood experiences within those of the larger community and society.

However, there are examples that reveal the values and actions that Addams and her colleagues would adopt in particular circumstances. One, closely associated with Hull-House, was what became known as the Bowen Country Club. This club was not a play space for the wealthy as the term “country club” implies today. Addams had a dream of giving low-income city children a taste of summer in the country. Louise deKoven Bowen and other social reformers made this dream a reality by providing funds for a summer camp near Waukegan, Illinois, with sleeping cottages for children and their mothers in 2-week rotations.

At the camp, city residents found relief from the noise, pollution, and violence of urban streets and learned to respect each other and the environment. “In a setting of great beauty, people of many races, religions and ethnic backgrounds lived, worked, played, ate, sang and danced together in an atmosphere of harmony and joy,” said one camp counselor (Dretske, 2013). Days were packed with activities such as swimming, sports contests, classes in folk or rhythmic dance, games, parties, and art lessons. A campfire and sing-a-long often ended the day. Every summer from 1912 until 1963, children from the congested streets of Chicago enjoyed the forest, fields, wildflowers, and ravine. Over 40,000 women and children benefited from summer stays there.

Figure 3 shows mothers and small children having a meal on the porch in one of the cottages in a photograph taken by Wallace Kirkland in 1930. For Addams, it was important to involve family and friends in early childhood education. It was also essential to provide opportunities to experience nature, especially for children from the inner city.

After Jane Addams’s death in 1935, the Jane Addams Hull-House Association continued her work. It provided more than 50 programs to about 60,000 people in the Chicago area, including childhood education, housing assistance, child welfare, economic development and job training, domestic violence relief, elder care, and literacy programs. However, it closed abruptly in 2012 due to funding problems (Feratu & Martin, 2012).

SCIENTIFIC STUDIES OF HULL-HOUSE AND ADDAMS’S IDEAS

Jane Addams’s work is among the most important contributions to education generally and among the most significant in the U.S. in any field. Yet there are



Fig. 3. Children eating on porch of Rosenwald Cottage—mothers and babies stayed there (Kirkland, 1930, June 1).

few scientific studies of its impact. That is in part because it started in the late 19th century, when the notion of a scientific study of education was in its infancy. But there are other reasons for the neglect.

The founders of Hull-House were women. In their era, that automatically meant that their work was consigned to the domestic realm, the private sphere. Decision makers, by and large men, did not consider that realm to be worthy of focused study. Moreover, as a woman, Addams was not allowed to become a professor or play other roles that commanded respect in the public sphere, even though she was a major influence on the development of the fields of sociology and social work, and, *ex officio*, helped shaped the world-famous “Chicago School” (Deegan, 1988a).

To make things worse, when Addams became an outspoken pacifist, the lack of attention turned into hostility. One writer said that Addams could be dissuaded from her pacifism if she had

a strong, forceful husband who would lift the burden of fate from her shoulders and get her intensely interested in fancy work and other things dear to the heart of women who have homes and plenty of time on their hands. (Davis, 1973, p. 240)

Later, from the late 1930s through the post–World War II era, there was a strong rightwing reaction to the entire progressive vision that Addams most clearly represented.

Nevertheless, assessments from a wide variety of perspectives are coming to the same conclusion: Addams’s work deserves a better hearing. It was significant for its time, but it is also highly relevant in our own (Elshtain, 2002; Hamington & Bardwell-Jones, 2012; Knight, 2005; Lasch, 1965; Seigfried, 1996; Shields, 2009). She did not self-identify as an early childhood educator; her work had a much larger scope. Yet remarkably, and precisely because of that scope, her work speaks directly to the practical issues of early childhood education today.

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