“It was clear that City and Country’s Blocks Program, even within just a few months of its introduction, had been transformative for students and teachers alike,” observed Nina Farrell, Lower School Floater and former Group Teacher. Nina’s exciting reflection followed a collaboration introducing C&C’s Blocks Program to second graders at PS 130. Now, many more NYC students and teachers will be able to have similar transformative experiences through Block Connection. It’s a reimagined and formalized program, championed by C&C teachers and offered free of charge to public school teachers through a Tietz Family Foundation grant, that is bringing the Blocks Program to schools across NYC.

C&C was founded on principles that reach beyond the walls of the School. It was always part of Caroline Pratt’s vision that our School serve as a model for change, both educational and societal. Through her vision she created a school that at its very core spoke of social consciousness, guiding children into experiencing the power of collective challenges and responsibilities. These principles are very much alive today as C&C educators actively create and embrace ways to reach outside our walls and exhibit the power of our program, simultaneously establishing themselves as emerging experts in the progressive education field and renewing their passion for our unique approach.

Mary Hauser emphasized this crucial part of Caroline Pratt’s vision in her book, Learning from Children: The Life and Legacy of Caroline Pratt:

“Having her ideas about teachers and learning accepted into public school was a goal that Miss Pratt maintained throughout her career. She could easily have been satisfied by the success of City and Country School in effectively preparing students for high school and college work. But the students she originally set out to teach, the children of immigrant families, remained in her thinking. Working with public schools would enable her to once again serve these students.”

In the 1930s, C&C worked diligently to form relationships with Putnam Valley Central School and PS 33 in Chelsea. They were among the first public schools to embrace and implement our unique principles, introducing progressive work and play programs into their curricula. Leaders and educators of both schools quickly recognized the value of the C&C philosophy, and the partnerships proved the validity and longevity of Caroline Pratt’s belief that the C&C curriculum was “good for children everywhere and of every kind, children who have apple trees to climb as well as children who carry the door key of a tenement flat around their necks.” In 1942, Caroline Pratt called the entrance of C&C into the public schools its “greatest excitement.”

Before returning to work at C&C 14 years ago as the Director of the Lower School, I worked for an arts education organization that placed visual artists in partnership with classroom teachers in underserved public schools. I observed committed administrators and teachers doing their utmost to support children and families in schools that were often overcrowded with rapidly diminishing resources. I left that position with opened eyes and a broader view, determined to build upon the relationships I had cultivated, and bring C&C experiences to a wider range of educators and children. To this end, Block Connection was born in 2005. Founded upon Caroline Pratt’s tenet that the C&C way is good for children in general, and the belief that teachers learn so much from each other, we constructed the framework of the program and have since partnered with Head Start daycare, and public school teachers to introduce the C&C philosophy and belief in basic open-ended materials to educators around the city.

As a testimony to how C&C is actively furthering this work, we received a $10,000 grant from the Tietz Family Foundation to formalize and expand the program. The grant allowed us to create a two-part program: The Block Connection Principals’ Breakfast, a chance for school leaders to visit C&C and learn firsthand about Block Connection, followed by the Block Connection Conference, a day-long workshop that introduced public school teachers to our program. At the Principals’ Breakfast in October 2018, visiting public school Principals were invited to “play and work with blocks in one of our Vis’ Classrooms. They ventured into a mindful, creative interaction with open-ended materials, and, needing little encouragement, they happily engaged and then reflected together on the experience. We then looked at what this initiative may be able to offer their teachers.

The administrators wholeheartedly saw value in bringing this training to members of their faculties, saying they wanted teachers at their schools to experience Block Connection to:

“... feel the joy that we can bring to our students.”

“... have more of an understanding of how they can use materials like this to integrate learning in more creative ways.”

“... learn how to get children to do more of the work and to allow things to get ‘messy.’”

“... have support to think creatively within the box.”

**Block Connection Initiative**

C&C began the Block Connection initiative 13 years ago, fulfilling founder Caroline Pratt’s vision of making a real change in how all children are taught, and bringing her approach to education to schools across the city. Partnering with public school teachers and administrators, C&C educators demonstrate how open-ended materials, unit blocks in particular, and a commitment to dramatic play, are crucial components of learning for young children. Through the initiative, C&C’s educators have extensively and successfully partnered with PS 38, PS 130, and PS 261 in Brooklyn, the Sicomac School in New Jersey, and with many other public schools on a smaller scale through Block Connection workshops.

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**Donna Taylor**

This grant and expansion of the Block Connection Initiative was sparked by renewed interest from some of our longtime partners, and a “coincidental” visit with Donna Taylor. Donna, an educator and wife of C&C alumn, Blakelock (Blake) Taylor ’73, had long heard stories from her husband and his C&C friends about their warm memories of learning surrounded by play at school. In her role as the founding Principal of the Brooklyn School of Inquiry, she even applied the essence of what she had learned from her husband and his friends into the foundation of the new public school. So in 2018, while mentoring a leader starting a new school with a vision of play as the core component of learning, Donna immediately thought of C&C and visited to gain a deeper understanding of our programs. That visit, along with the support of the Tietz Family Foundation, led to the creation of the Block Connection Conference.
Q&A with Becky Ann Baker

Emmy-nominated actress and alumni parent, Becky Ann Baker, narrated the audiobook of our founder Caroline Pratt’s memoir, I Learn from Children, now available free of charge through Audible. After finishing her time in the recording booth, Becky sat down to answer a few questions about the experience.

Q. C&C approached you about reading I Learn from Children just as you were starting a new off-Broadway play, Cardinal. Considering your busy schedule, what was it about this project that made it worthwhile for you?

A. Our daughter, Willa ’07, went to C&C for nine years of her education. We came to love and appreciate the educational environment and spirit of the School. Reading the book seemed like a great way to give back and celebrate our time there.

Q. How did you prepare for the role of Caroline Pratt?

A. Rereading the book in preparation to read it on “tape” was the only way to prepare. Caroline is so forthcoming about her progress in becoming an educator. She walks us through her discoveries year after year! By doing so, we learn so much about her, especially about her compassion for the children she’s teaching. The interesting thing to me as an actor was that she was 80 when she wrote the book! I didn’t want to try to create that particular age, as she starts at the beginning of her career and moves forward. Instead, I wanted to give her dignity and a formality that went with the early part of the 1900s and beyond. It was a dignity that was consistent with her writing.

Q. How is audiobook work different than television, film, and theater?

A. I love doing audiobooks because you get to be all of the characters and tell the whole story. A shorter version is reading to your child at night. The audience is completely yours! It’s a lot of fun for an actor.

Q. Was there anything in the book that surprised you or made you look at education in a different way?

A. The most surprising thing about Caroline’s book is how current the thinking is! Her insights from the early 1900s are still relevant and timely. Putting the child first still works!

Q. How did your background as a C&C parent influence your approach to the narration?

A. My understanding of a C&C education informed the entire book. The producer with whom I was recording was so impressed with Caroline’s thinking. We talked about the School between takes, and I had so much fun describing the School to someone new. I was hoping to put all of that knowledge into Caroline’s words.

Q. In what ways has Caroline’s philosophy of progressive education had a lasting impact on Willa, and by extension, on you and your family?

A. Our entire family has been influenced by a C&C education. I imagine every family that has spent time “learning from the children” looks at education differently. Asking questions fearlessly is the beginning and it never ends.