

# The Making of a Progressive Educator: Flora White's Letters from Africa (1885-87)

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## Abstract

This paper explores factors contributing to Flora White's transition from teaching in a public school to founding a private, child-centered school during the progressive era. Letters White wrote from southern Africa in 1885-87 suggest her transition was encouraged by the following: normal school training, the liberating effect of overseas travel, a restrictive environment that intensified her focus on students, and an organizational structure that provided leadership opportunities she might have been denied at home.

## Introduction

In *Founding Mothers and Others: Women Leaders during the Progressive Era*, Sadovnik and Semel (2002) explore the lives of female teachers who established independent schools in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. During a time when most progressives concentrated on improving public schools through scientific management techniques, curricular reform, and vocational education, these women created innovative schools that focused on the needs of middle class children. Although many of the biographical subjects in *Founding Mothers and Others* were virtually unknown, Rugg and Shumaker had, as early as 1928, highlighted the importance of practitioners who worked outside existing systems of public and higher education to create child-centered schools. The authors posed a question to readers:

Where in the American school system could it start? Not easily in the great body of public schools, committed to mass education and domineered over by the disciplinarian conception. Not even

in the laboratory schools of the new schools of education that were springing up all over the country, for they were immersed in a veritable slough of technique—the investigation of intelligence, the analysis of the learning processes in the school subjects, and the statistical study of school practice.

No, the movement for a freer type of education had to be launched almost altogether from outside the school system. It came, after the preparatory years, essentially from laymen, parents of means desiring the best in the way of schools for their children, and enthusiastic free-lance teachers. (Rugg & Shumaker, 1969, pp. 48-49)

Despite the recognition of the free-lance teachers' critical role, few sources reveal the process by which they came to eschew widely-accepted educational practice to found their own child-centered schools. Some insights are offered in memoirs written by two educators who are featured in *Founding Mothers and Others*.

In *30 Years with an Idea*, Marietta Johnson (1974) explained why she rejected the prevailing pedagogy in public education (in which the curriculum was sacred) to found the child-centered Organic School in Fair Hope, Alabama. Johnson reported that, after reading *Development of the Child* by Nathaniel Oppenheim (1898), she had a "conversion" experience which changed her "entire scheme of thinking and teaching" (1974, p. xi). She recalled:

I discovered that I had been forcing children 'way beyond their powers, that I had practically been maiming their minds and emotions, and that the entire system under which I taught went

directly contrary to the natural needs of the child. I determined to do no more teaching until I knew more about children, and for several years I worked and studied, trying to find out what children needed, and what sort of environment would make for their finest growth. (Johnson, 1974, pp. xi-xii)

Johnson found a practical course of action in *Education and the Larger Life* by Charles Manford Henderson (1902), and she began to experiment with her own small sons. Eventually she moved to the utopian colony of Fairhope, Alabama, where she opened the Organic School in 1907.

In *I Learn from Children*, Caroline Pratt (1948) likewise discussed the life experiences that led to her founding of the City and Country School in New York City in 1914. She recalled, “My own education was given me, not in teacher-training courses, not by professors of pedagogy, but by children themselves.” (1948, p. 7). Pratt’s book details her first experiences in education—as a teacher in a one-room country school, a student at Teachers College, a teacher of manual training in the Normal School for Girls in Philadelphia, and a free lancer who ran manual training shops in New York City. These initiatives culminated in Pratt’s founding (in a three-room apartment in Greenwich Village) the City and Country School, emphasizing first-hand discovery.

While Johnson’s and Pratt’s books are helpful, they have the limitation of being memoirs written years after the fact for commercial audiences. This paper explores a unique primary source—a collection of letters written by Flora White (1850-1948), whose early initiatives in child-centered education preceded those of Johnson and Pratt. White opened her first “experimental” school in Springfield,

Massachusetts, in 1887, and in a letter to Anne Hathaway from 17 June, 1940 she described her first school as an “experiment in motor training as a means of education.” During the course of her career, White spoke on child-centered education to parent and professional groups; gave lectures in Boston that alternated (every other week) with those of William James; and taught at Westfield Normal School in an effort to meet an “acute” need for new teaching methods (“Life Facts,” 1939, p. 5). She received a job offer from Colonel Francis Parker to head a department at the Cook County Normal School, which she declined because her Westfield appointment was “so recent” (“Life Facts,” 1939, p. 5). In 1896, she presented a paper at the annual meeting of the National Education Association (NEA) at a time when, according to Rousmaniere (2005), NEA speakers were “all male and almost all administrators” (p. 106). One year later she founded Miss White’s Home School for Children in Concord, Massachusetts; it received the endorsement of child-study advocate G. Stanley Hall “for its general methods and scope, and for the devoted personal attention each pupil is sure to receive.” (*Miss White’s Home School*, 1900, p. 7).

### **Contextualizing the letters**

Flora White wrote her letters in 1885-87—immediately after teaching in a public school, and immediately before founding a child-centered school in Springfield. During that two-year period she traveled to the Cape Colony (now part of South Africa) where her sister Hattie was a teacher at the Huguenot Seminary at Wellington. Hattie had suffered a “breakdown,” and Flora resigned her teaching job in a Springfield public elementary school to lend assistance (Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 6 June, 1887). She accepted a position (with paid

transportation) teaching English to the sons of Dutch, English, and Huguenot settlers in “the Paarl” (Dutch for “pearl”), near Wellington. As she traveled by steamship from the U. S. to Liverpool (with a short visit in London) and then to Cape Town on H. M. S. “Spartan,” White was accompanied by Abbie Ferguson, a founder of the Huguenot Seminary.

Eleven years earlier, Ferguson and Anna E. Bliss—both graduates of Mount Holyoke Seminary in Massachusetts—had gone to Wellington at the invitation of Andrew Murray, moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church. Murray was troubled by what he perceived to be a dearth of rigorous academic instruction for middle class white girls in the Cape Colony. Ferguson and Bliss brought the curriculum, rules, traditions, and architectural plans of Mount Holyoke to southern Africa, where they were greeted by an overflow of young women between the ages of fifteen and twenty. Although Flora White resided at Huguenot Seminary for a short time before returning home during the summer of 1887, her long-term residence in the Cape Colony was at the Paarl in the rural home of her principal Mr. le Roux, his wife, and their children.

By the time White returned to Massachusetts, Hattie’s health had improved. The record of Flora’s two-year experience exists in 31 letters she wrote to her sister Mary (a public school teacher) and their mother, Harriet M. White, both of Springfield, Massachusetts. The letters show that White did not experience a conversion as described by Marietta Johnson. Neither did her lessons in child-centered education come exclusively from children, as Caroline Pratt contended. Rather, White’s evolution as a child-centered educator was encouraged by several sources: her normal school training, the liberating experience of overseas travel, a restrictive environment that intensified

her focus on students, and an organizational structure that allowed her to gain leadership experience that might have been denied to her at home. These points will be amplified below.

## **Review of literature**

Apart from those already named, few sources describe the process by which educators rejected widespread instructional practices in public schools and adopted a child-centered curriculum. According to Sadovnik and Semel (2002), most of the founders of child-centered schools were women. Tyack (1974) details the bureaucratization and standardization in public education to which child-centered teachers objected, as well as the gender stereotyping that caused men to be appointed as administrators supervising a feminized teaching force. Three classics provide helpful background on the antecedents of child-centered schools. Kliebard (1986) discusses the ideological lines in U. S. education at the turn of the twentieth century in a chapter entitled “The Curriculum versus the Child.” His focus, however, is on G. Stanley Hall and John Dewey, not women teachers. Cremin (1969) emphasizes G. Stanley Hall’s role in changing pedagogical opinion by shifting attention from teaching to the student. In *Life and Confessions of a Psychologist*, Hall (1923) details his own involvement in child-study assisted by four female kindergarten teachers. The result was a paper titled “The Contents of Children’s Minds” that suggested teachers could not assume a common body of knowledge among children entering school (pp. 374-414). Hall’s book offers the names of other women who collected bodies of data that were important to his work on childhood.

It is noteworthy that Flora White’s transformation from public school teacher to founder of a child-centered school occurred

during her two years of overseas travel. Marietta Johnson's founding of the Organic School also occurred during a significant relocation when she and her husband moved from their native Minnesota to Fair Hope, Alabama. Caroline Pratt's gradual evolution to child-centered educator involved multiple changes of place, from her original home in upstate New York to Philadelphia and New York City. Given those commonalities, it is appropriate to consult the literature of women's travel writing to gain further insight into White's experience during 1885-87.

Schriber (1997) wrote that although men have a long history of travel in the West, women did not venture to other parts of the globe until the early nineteenth century. Those who did were "accidental" tourists accompanying their fathers or husbands, largely for commercial or political reasons (p. 2). With the advent of steam-powered ships of the 1820s—and the subsequent introduction of "luxurious steam palaces" that traversed the Atlantic beginning in the 1860s—U.S. women began to go abroad in larger numbers, and for their own reasons (p. 2). Siegel (1994) noted that the women "skirted a delicate course" because their travel—especially when unchaperoned—was viewed as inappropriate for their gender (p. 2). McDowell (1999) wrote that this was in part because the concept of women's travel challenged the West's spatial association between women and home. Bijon and Gacon (2009) and Blunt (1994) found that women who wrote about their travels experienced an increase in individual freedom. Blunt (1994) contended that this occurred because travel presented an opportunity to transgress or question ideas that were accepted at home. Schriber (1997) noted that travel gave women an opportunity to interact with "the other" and afforded them a sense of freedom that helped to prepare the way for the "New

Woman" of the Progressive Era (pp. 21, 37). She also asserted that travel gave Americans a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority over their fellow citizens. Blanton (2002) noted, however, that women who traveled in colonial environments also demonstrated sympathy for subjugated people. She suggested this stemmed, in part, from the women's position outside the dominant patriarchal structure at home and abroad.

### **Sources and methodology**

Primary sources for the paper include letters Flora White wrote to her widowed mother, Harriet M. White, and sister, Mary A. White, who resided in Springfield, Massachusetts, when Flora lived and traveled in the Cape Colony. Other important primary sources include White's unpublished manuscript titled "Life Facts of Flora White and Family Recorded March 18, 1939" as well as her published and unpublished speeches. The secondary sources—in addition to those already cited—include White's school bulletins, Duff's (2006) thesis on the history of the Huguenot Seminary, and histories of South Africa by Thompson (2000), Ross (2008), Meredith (2007), and Elphick and Davenport (1997).

The methodology was, first, to carefully review White's letters for expressions of dissatisfaction with public schools and, second, to juxtapose her correspondence against six "New Articles of Faith," that Rugg and Shumaker identified in 1928 as exemplifying child-centered education (1969, p. 54), and will be described below. A third step was to examine White's professional work following her return to Massachusetts to determine the extent to which she acted upon expressed sentiments that reflected the "New Articles of Faith." The discussion of White's letters begin with a

consideration of her experience with public schools.

### ***Flora white's experience with public education***

Prior to going to the Cape Colony, White had over eight years of experience teaching in public schools. With no formal training, she had decided to “try...[her] hand” at teaching in a rural school at Hawley, Massachusetts and then in 1875 entered a two-year teacher training program at Westfield Normal School (“Life Facts,” 1939, p. 3). Westfield primarily prepared residents of the five western Massachusetts counties for teaching jobs in the public schools. During White’s attendance there, the principal was John Dickinson, a follower of Pestalozzi who later became Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education. Dickinson believed that learning occurred in stages associated with the age of the child. He also utilized “object teaching” in which new material was introduced to children “through senses other than words” (Brown, 1988, p. 51). Dickinson’s beliefs strongly influenced the teacher training program during White’s attendance at Westfield.

White graduated from normal school in 1877 and taught in public schools in West Springfield and Springfield during a time when Massachusetts became the most urban of the states. Industrialization was occurring rapidly as homogenous communities of Yankee farmers strained to absorb large numbers of immigrants. Urban superintendents responded to demographic changes by replacing the decision-making processes of village schools with top-down, bureaucratic practices designed to control students, teachers, and principals. Tyack (1974) noted that, in the new order, “each step of the educational process was carefully prescribed by professional educators” (p. 40). Looking back on her career in 1896, Flora White criticized the

standardization and regimentation of the period, noting, “It has long been a fancy of mine that nature covers her face and weeps whenever she beholds a schoolhouse” (“Physical Effects of Sloyd,” 1896 , p. 3). White bemoaned the “dreary brick buildings on small plots of ground, where children are driven into rooms by fifties and sixties, yes even by hundreds with the hobgoblin of the law and the truant officer behind them, and then compelled to sit for five long hours each day” with few opportunities for movement (“Physical Effects of Sloyd,” 1896 , p. 5).

### **Article One: Freedom v. Control**

Rugg and Shumanker wrote that the first “New Article of Faith” was, “Free the legs, the arms, the larynx of a child, ... and you have taken the first step towards freeing his mind and spirit” (1969, p. 55). To accomplish that end, child-centered educators replaced the “lock-step precision” of scientific managers and “[f]ixed seats nailed to the floor” with an “informal, intimate atmosphere” evidenced by “[l]ight, movable tables and chairs” ” (1969, p. 55). In March 1887—months before she left the Cape Colony to return to Massachusetts—Flora White was already envisioning a school that encouraged student movement. She urged Mary to resign her public school position and expressed hope that the sisters might open a new school in Springfield:

I do dread your going on in the Public School and I think if you have a comfortable house and a nice little school in it you will be much better off than now. Don't you think you could send a doz. or so chairs and 1 or two low tables, like the kindergarten table, for them to sit around in place of desks. Would not Mr. Bradley let you have them? (Flora White to Mary A. and Harriet M. White, 6 March 1887)

In the same letter, White imagined the “informal, intimate atmosphere” described by Rugg and Shumaker:

I care more about a plot of ground than the house & we would only be cozy in small quarters—I can’t explain to you now the tremendous importance in my mind of the plot of ground if our school becomes what I want it to become. It would be nice if we could have a house quite to ourselves... I want the school rooms a part of the house or at least joined to it in some way when we have our own.” (Flora White to Mary A. and Harriet M. White, 6 March 1887)

To Rugg and Shumaker, the first “New Article of Faith” involved “an easier, more natural group life” and “[f]reedom to develop naturally, to be spontaneous, unaffected, and unselfconscious...” (1969, p. 56). Before White could promote freedom in children, however, she had to establish personal freedom in her own life. White’s correspondence suggests that, through travel, she had new opportunities to develop in that direction.

Early in her journey, White sensed the opportunity for liberation and growth that foreign travel presented. The transformation is evident in her letters. On the first night of her initial voyage across the Atlantic, she told herself, “there is nobody I want to know except those lovely looking people [Mrs. Babcock and her daughter Mrs. Martin, both of Chicago] who kept by themselves & noticed no one... I did not expect in the least to become acquaintances with them” (Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 3 August, 1885). By the time she arrived in England White wrote, “I formed such a pleasant friendship on board the steamer with those Chicago people... Mrs. Martin & I are

going to write one another” (Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 3 August, 1885). Less than one month later, as White traveled to the Cape Colony via Madeira on the steamship “Spartan,” she viewed the trip with optimism—even exhilaration—writing, “I do not have a single feeling of dread about anything and mean to enjoy everything and everybody” (Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 30 August, 1885). As she anticipated her arrival at Cape Town, White confidently wrote to her mother and sister, “I really am a fine sailor and stand the rolling beautifully—in fact I rather like it today. I have been exalting myself generally but I await your reprimands. You are both home now and I do hope as well & happy as I am” (Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 30 August, 1885).

Another example of White’s growing personal freedom is seen in her stopover in London. Abbie Ferguson became ill, and White stayed with her for two days. As Ferguson showed signs of improvement, White consulted a guidebook and explored London on her own. The correspondence suggests this was new behavior on White’s part. She reported, “I started off by myself. Imagine me prowling about the big city alone—It is very easy & does not seem bigger than any city when you are in it” (Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 6 August, 1885).

White’s developing self confidence is also evident in interactions with women and men on the “Spartan” who—unlike the Chicago travelers—were not U. S. citizens. In August 1885, White wrote, “Everybody is so very nice to me that I am afraid my head will be quite turned with attention. I have had so many toasts & speeches & compliments & things made to me I feel like locking my cabin door & not coming out at all” (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 30

August, 1885). White reported that her fellow travelers looked to her for entertainment. To their delight, the spontaneous young woman staged *tableaux* (depictions of scenes) and arranged other group activities. For example, White convinced passengers to dress up in a “sheet and pillow masquerade” noting, “You could not tell the gentlemen from the ladies” She also persuaded an English traveler to give a talk on London, organized singing, and narrated a “comic pantomime” of the Eve of Waterloo, with six passengers acting the parts. White reported, “It was simply killing” (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 30 August, 1885).

Just before her arrival in Cape Town, the ship captain extracted a promise from White, thereby suggesting her life in the Cape Colony might differ from the relaxed spontaneity of the “Spartan.” White wrote, “The Capt. made me promise to write him if I got blue and wanted my address. He told me over and over again not to change or allow myself to *rust*” (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 30 August, 1885).

### **Article Two: Child Initiative v. Teacher Initiative**

Rugg and Shumaker characterized the second “New Article of Faith” as the “reorientation of the entire school around the child,” in marked contrast to the teacher-centered or principal-centered school (1969, p. 56). White’s school at the Paarl was not child-centered; however, it lacked the bureaucratic organization of the Springfield public schools. This created professional opportunity for a creative and resourceful teacher who demonstrated leadership potential. As early as November 1885, White was weighing school leadership opportunities. She wrote her mother:

There is a girls school here at the Paarl & I have been asked to take charge of it if I would like to—It has been badly managed & a great need is felt of having a change created—I think perhaps I shall take charge of the Primary Department another quarter—I am not sure—There is certainly more need of good teaching there than in Mr. le Roux’s school for he keeps his in excellent working order—There is nothing to influence my taking it except my own personal choice in the matter—Mr. le Roux would be very sorry to have me go from his school—but he would get the benefit of it if I did as the boys from the Primary School go into his. So he is willing I should do just as I like in the matter. (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 14 November, 1885)

Although White opted to stay with Mr. le Roux, he left the school before she returned to Massachusetts. White assumed some of his duties before the new principal’s arrival. In April 1887 she wrote, “In one week more we will have our new Principal and I will be glad—the school is too headless now though it goes pretty well on the whole” (Flora White to Harriet M. White, n.d. April 1887).

Throughout her stay at the Cape Colony, White’s letters indicate that *students* were the focus of *her interests*. This was due to her diligence as a teacher as well as to her isolation and general lack of opportunity for young women in the Cape Colony. White’s letters confirmed this as, for example, when she wrote her mother and sister in May 1886, “I don’t know if you will be interested in all this about my boys but they are the only thing I have to interest me” (Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 23 May, 1886). The degree to which the Paarl contrasted with the atmosphere White encountered on the “Spartan” is evident in a letter

White wrote to her sister shortly before returning home:

It will seem so sweet to have real companionship again after these two years of hermitage. I hope I have not grown crusty [an apparent reference to the captain's comment]. I am firmly convinced though that prolonged stay would transform me outwardly and as far as all practical purposes are concerned entirely into a wide, stolid, prolific Dutch "Vrau." You will have to pinch me to keep me trim. I never think to smile now. I incline my head slowly and very slightly to show recognition, and impassively shake hands on all possible occasions. However I am not seriously alarmed but when the presence is removed I shall rebound fast enough. I find that I am of a very cock-like and rubbery temperament. I can sustain a good deal of pressure without being ultimately affected by it (Flora White to Mary A. White, 28 February, 1887).

Some of White's dissatisfaction with her environment may have stemmed from her dislike of Mrs. le Roux, whom she described as selfish, jealous, unchristian, and having very few friends. When Mr. le Roux was no longer principal of the school and White moved to live at the Huguenot Seminary, she regarded her new living situation as an improvement.

In communicating her primary focus on students, White described one class of boys between the ages of ten and twelve as follows: "They are not very bright as scholars, but I mean to make them as I never enjoyed teaching any pupils more than the boys of this school" (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 9 August, 1886). In another letter she reported that her boys were away from school for two days, taking standardized exams. White expressed hope that

they would do well, noting, "I have worked ever so hard for them and I think the boys appreciate it. I am not tired now though" (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 20 March, 1887). On another occasion she wrote:

I am as well as can be and very much interested in my boys and work. They are such nice boys—one of them, a handsome Jew, who is gentlemanly and a beautiful scholar is going to leave in a few days—His people are going up to the Diamond Fields to live—He feels very badly about leaving school but thinks his father will be able to send him back as a boarder after a few months—They have not been in the Colony but a few years and came from London. (Flora White to Harriet M. White and Mary A. White, 23 May, 1886)

### **Article Three: The Active School**

Rugg and Shumaker noted that in child-centered schools, "pupils are active—physically active, mentally active, artistically active. There is a large amount of actual physical exertion, of overt bodily movement of a wide variety of sensory contacts, of the type of energy-release which is ordinarily designated as play" (1969, p. 58). There are several instances in which White's letters show her preference for active learning. In one letter White chides her sister Mary: "[Y]ou don't seem to think much of my dear little school. You make me laugh calling them brats & bedlam" (Flora White to Mary A. White, 27 December, 1885). When she and Hattie prepared for a student concert in Wellington, White referred to "about 20 children in all, such splendid bright-rollicking boys, just as affectionate and sweet as they can be" (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 25 November, 1886). She and Hattie took the children into the laundry room for practice. White described the scene:

You should have seen the little fellows there, singing with might—and ... me tapping out the time with a broom stick as demurely as possible. They just graded in size, each one a tiny bit higher than the next younger—Such dear little fellows I never saw—they went right for my heartstrings with a tug. (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 25 November, 1886)

Another letter describes a pageant given by the older boys that recalled White's *tableaux* on the "Spartan":

They have a few scenes from King John and a little modern drama besides. Maggie [Abbie Ferguson's niece] and I made a complete set of armor for King John out of paste board covered with tin foil—The shield was of dark glazed paper bordered with silver and a huge lion in the center—the result of my artistic genius? —we got a real helmet and covered it properly and managed the whole thing very nicely. (Flora White to Harriet M. White, n.d. Winter 1887)

#### **Article Four: Child Interest as the Basis of a New Educational Program**

Rugg and Shumaker wrote that while a traditional school was organized around subjects, the new school sets up a program of work that "has a personal connection with the immediate life of the child" (1969, p. 61). Although White's school at the Paarl was organized by subject, she was quick to respond when students expressed a need or interest. For example, one night when she was reading in the le Roux home White was approached by a representative of five boys who boarded in the dormitory outside. The boys wanted to join her and asked to come inside for a prayer. White did not want to refuse them and

requested that they return at nine o'clock. She stopped what she was doing and used the available time to look for and write a prayer that would be appropriate for them. White explained:

I am in the habit of petitioning in my private devotions and though wonderfully adapted to my own needs they did not seem to apply exactly to the case of family devotions—I was quite wild—I rushed to my room & got the prayer book. Everything was too short, besides the boys knowing them was a drawback—I tried to piece some... [prayers] together but the patchwork was not a success. I decided that the prayers for public service in church did not exactly apply to family worship either—I then tried to make up a nice one & learn it by heart but it was no use, there was not time enough. I rushed to my room again, seized pen & paper & wrote out one—a very good one I think—I hid it in a book on the table—I knelt by the table & prayed into the book & read—I think I was not discovered by the boys—If I was not they surely must have thought me very fluent in prayer...what I wanted I prayed for—so I am not at all ashamed of the performance. (Flora White to Harriet M. White, n.d. August or September, 1886)

#### **Article Five: Creative Self-Expression**

Rugg and Shumaker noted that traditional schools sought to encourage "conformity to a pattern imposed from without" (1969, p. 63). The new school, by contrast, elicited "self expression in all of the arts, in discovering a marvelously creative youth" (Ross & Shumaker, 1969, p. 63).

White—who frequently illustrated her letters with sketches—had a strong interest in her students' creative self expression. In November 1885 she reported, "My boys are doing so well in drawing and enjoy it so much. I feel quite

enthusiastic” (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 14 November, 1885). White devoted one letter to her efforts at encouraging a budding student poet. As an adult, the subject of her letter—Eugene Marais—became a famous naturalist and poet and who led the Afrikaans language movement. White described the young Marais’ creative talents as follows:

I am sure the boy has genius and I am so anxious if he has to have it developed—He is such a sweet demure boy that cares only for reading and being in the fields by him self—He has read Dante & Petrarch, Milton, Shakespeare—in fact nearly all the classics but if course knows nothing of Modern Literature—I mean that which is first afloat now. He has the truest ring in his appreciation of the beautiful—He comes from the Transvaal and is of French Huguenot decent—the other day he wrote some verses full of patriotic resentment against English rule for the Colony—I will send you some things he has written in the package that goes by Miss Bliss and you must show them to Mr. Brooks and perhaps Mrs. Foote and see what they say of my little boy poet.

He is such a sweet boy and has had no chance of being spoiled in any way—I had a nice long talk with him last night about his reading and writing—He says sometimes he gets quite agitated in school or some place where something is said or occurs which arouses him and he wants to write it but he can’t then and in an hour or two the feeling has passed away and he thinks no more about it—I am *so* interested in him and feel quite sure that he has real genius in him. He is a very fair scholar—he would be about in the Sophomore class at Amherst or any ordinary college—and he is about 15 now I think. (Flora White to Harriet M.

White and Mary A. White, 23 May, 1886)

### **New Article Six: Personality and Social Adjustment**

Rugg and Shumaker characterize the final “New Article of Faith” as providing an environment by which each child can learn to live with others and yet retain his personal identity” (1969, p. 64). In one letter to her mother, White applauded a plucky student who came to her defense when White challenged the Paarl’s traditional gender roles. An adult reader had written the local paper to question the wisdom of having “a lady teacher” in the boys’ school. The “offended” pupil responded, stating “that he would defy the Paarl to produce a more competent or capable teacher than Miss White. She reported that it “of course was too silly & boyish a thing to do for no one had spoken of me & those who said (about a lady teacher) knew nothing about me except I was a female. But I liked the boy’s spirit in standing up for his teacher (Flora White to Harriet M. White, 9 August, 1886).

Whether she was discussing the plucky youngster, the Jewish student, or Eugene Marais, White showed little interest in limiting the boys’ individuality. At the same time, she emphasized the importance of living harmoniously with others, as evidenced by a thank-you letter she received from one of her students: “I thank you very much for your good instructions you have given me in school & another thing that I want to tell you is that, that you have learned me to behave in school for at first you yourself know that I had no manners to behave in school” (John Van Breda to Flora White, 15 June, 1887).

### **White’s return**

During the summer of 1887, Flora White returned to Massachusetts with a clear focus. Shortly after her arrival, she and Mary founded a small private school in a Springfield home “to experiment in motor-training as a means of education” (Flora White to Anne Halfpenny, 17 June, 1940). Motor-training, or the development of fine and gross motor skills, reflected the first and third “New Articles of Faith” described by Rugg and Shumaker (1969). While no documents remain from the White sisters’ Springfield school, the progression of Flora’s career show that she continued to be engaged by issues of student freedom and physical movement. During the summer of 1891, she studied motor training and pedagogy in Sweden and paid her way with a short story she sold to *Harper’s*. (The story, “Zan Zoo,” appeared under a male pen name in 1891. Set in the Cape Colony, it sympathetically portrayed a black servant girl who was abused by her white mistress, who bore a resemblance to Mrs. le Roux!) White also trained under Baron Nils Posse at the Normal School of Gymnastics in Boston (becoming his Associate Principal in 1895), and taught woodworking and gymnastics at Westfield Normal School. In 1897 she received a diploma from the Sloyd Training School in Boston (Sloyd” is an English adaptation of the Swedish *slojd*, or handcraft, and the Sloyd Training School used physical activity in handcraft production as a means of formative education) and also founded Miss White’s Home School for Children in Concord, Massachusetts. The school operated until 1914 when it closed at Mary White’s request, due to her health. The sisters had hoped to travel in Europe, but the First World War prevented them from doing so. Instead, they retired to Heath, Massachusetts, the town of their birth.

Flora White described the Concord school as “an effort in the direction of organic education”

(*Miss White’s Home School* 1900, p. 1) with an unusual feature:

The mental work is reinforced by opportunities for motor training that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Through childcraft, sloyd, games, gymnastics, and careful attention to department, the body is made the ready instrument of the mind. (*Miss White’s Home School* 1906, p. 2)

Throughout her career, White lectured to women’s clubs and professional groups on a variety of educational topics. In her speeches she promoted a respect for each child’s individuality and cautioned against interfering with nature’s plan for its development. White felt the teacher should “surround the growing life with suitable materials for its use and... watch and wait patiently for its unfolding, letting it select and draw until itself those things which it desires and needs” (“Child Training and Evolution,” part 2, p. 11). She advised teachers to “learn of the child the road of its desires, and travel along that road—hand in hand with it—beside it, not in front of it...[or] above it” ( “Physical Effects of Sloyd,” 1899, p. 9). Her advice coincides with Rugg and Shumaker’s (1969) second, fourth, and sixth “New Articles of Faith.”

Finally, White was a strong advocate for fostering students’ creative self expression, as in the fifth “New Article of Faith.” Her views stemmed from a belief that the goal of education is “More life and fuller” for all students (Rugg and Shumaker, 1969). White thought that too often schools imposed their own systems of work on children and concentrated excessively on task completion, which signaled the end of growth. In one unpublished speech, White described a boy whose mind was seen by the “orthodox school” to be in a chaotic state. Rather than training the

boy's mind to a predetermined standard (thereby causing resentment in the child), White felt the school should accept the chaos of the boy's mind as normal, and let him "test and do and dare" ("Child Training and Evolution," part 2, pp. 6-10). Miss White's Home School produced alumni who excelled at creative self expression, including sculptor Mary Ogden Abbott (a graduate of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston who exhibited her work in the Department of the Interior in Washington, D. C.) and Henry Howard Brooks (a member of the Guild of Boston Artists who exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington).

### Conclusion and epilogue

In June 1940, at eighty years of age, Flora White wrote the President of the Alumni Association at Westfield State College, her alma mater. Recalling her professional accomplishments, White observed it had been an "extremely crowded" career. She noted with pleasure that Miss White's Home School was "a marked success" and "the climax of my educational work" (Flora White to Anne Halfpenny, 17 June, 1940). Still resistant to predetermined standards of education, she was quick to note:

I made it clearly understood that...[Miss White's Home School] was an experiment in educational values; that it stood upon the merits of its theories and would be in no way dominated or influenced by college requirements. My pupils however found no difficulty in passing college examinations. (Flora White to Anne Halfpenny, 17 June, 1940)

Flora White's correspondence in 1885-87, as well as her subsequent professional work,

show her transition to child-centered education occurred not because of a conversion experience, nor because of lessons learned solely from children. Rather, White's evolution was the result of multiple factors, including her normal school training, the liberating experience of overseas travel, a restrictive environment that intensified her focus on students, and an organizational structure that provided leadership opportunities she might have been denied at home. Ever the child-centered educator, White's career fulfilled the hope expressed by one of her boys as she left the Paarl in 1887: "Dear Miss White we thank you very much for all the trouble you have taken to teach us... If you perhaps intend teaching again in America I hope that you may take it up as diligently as you have done it here" (Isaac Roos to Flora White, 16 June, 1887).

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