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Margaret and Rachel McMillan: their influences on open-air nursery education and early years teacher education

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ABSTRACT Rachel and Margaret McMillan created an open-air nursery in Deptford, London that has influenced early years education for 100 years. Their vision for young children living in poverty and deprivation to have access to fresh air through outdoor learning, nutritious meals, and an enriching environment to explore and develop has been embraced and interpreted internationally since its inception. This article explores the founding of the nursery, the ethos behind the practice, and the influence the open-air nursery has had on contemporary early years practice in England.

Introduction

Rachel and Margaret McMillan were Christian Socialists who worked to improve the lives of the poor and working class of England. They were actively involved in creating health and dental clinics for people living in deprivation in Bradford, Bow and Deptford, campaigned for the 1906 Provision of School Meals Act, and created night camps for deprived children in Deptford in 1908. In March 1914, the Rachel McMillan Nursery opened its doors to the youngest children living in the tenements of Deptford. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this area of London experienced extreme deprivation with a shortage of space, clean and affordable housing and reasonably well-paid jobs (Bradburn, 1989). Children were living in squalor leading them to experience a plethora of health issues and social deprivation which the McMillan sisters were determined to address. The nursery was designed to offer these children a chance to experience clean clothing, healthy food and have space to learn in fresh air.

Creating the Nursery

Margaret McMillan was introduced to Deptford when she was appointed as the manager of a group of elementary schools in the area in 1903 (Steedman, 1990).

> In Deptford as a whole the infant mortality rates in 1909 and 1910 were 104 and 124 per thousand. But in the East ward [Margaret's main catchment area] in the same years they were 136 and 189; roughly one fifth of the children born in this ward did not survive their first year of life. (McMillan, 1927, p. 37)

She described her refreshed mission as 'millions of children needing nurture, millions of women doing work for which they had no real preparation and no real help' (McMillan, 1927, p. 96). With their Christian Socialist ethos, the McMillan sisters made the conscious decision to create change for the working poor living in the tenement slums around the docks and throughout Deptford.

The McMillans subsequently determined that they would open an experimental overnight 'camp' in the garden at Evelyn Street, for the use of local girls. Camp beds were made from gas piping, trestle tables and canvas and shelters were constructed by a local carpenter. Washing facilities for the children were provided, as was a nutritious breakfast in the morning. Margaret McMillan described the facilities: 'a hot water apparatus was rigged up in the garden fence communicating with a neighbour's boiler ... Miss Sewell [the camp guardian employed by the McMillans] fixed a pipe and hose over the yard drain' (McMillan, 1919, p. 85).

The daily regime was outlined by Margaret McMillan as follows:

> The camp girls ranged in age from six to fourteen. They arrived early in the evening and had certain camp duties to perform ... they had plenty of time to play in the garden ... Every elder girl had charge of a younger one, looking after her toilet: hair, teeth, nails, bathing ... At seven o'clock ... two girls put out their wooden beds ... By eight o'clock all was quiet ... I laid in a good stock of oatmeal ... The breakfast was always porridge and milk, which the girls cooked ... They left for school at a quarter to nine.
> (McMillan, 1919, pp. 84-85)

The camp soon became a local success, and the sisters determined to provide a night camp for boys, which proved more difficult due to space limitations. In 1912 they made their first attempt at a Boys' Camp in the churchyard of St Nicholas, with the vestry as the shelter in bad weather, but some local people objected, one proposing that 'to think of taking living children into a burying ground [was] ... disgraceful' (McMillan, 1919, pp. 80-81). The vicar of St Nicholas subsequently bowed to pressure from his parishioners and asked the sisters to move the camp to a different location. Eventually they found a patch of waste ground in nearby Albury Street, and the boys' camp thrived there.

In 1914, two things happened almost simultaneously. Firstly, the McMillans opened a 'Baby Camp' at 232 Church Street, Deptford.

> The London County Council, anxious to obtain the help of young married women in the munition factories, offered Margaret a much larger site for her nursery in Church Street. The rental was only one schilling a year and a grant of nine pence [seven pence] a day was promised for the children of war workers. But it was made perfectly clear the Council could demand the return of the land at any time. Indeed it was already earmarked for a large elementary school – a three-decker. (Lowndes, 1960, p. 68)

That piece of land was (and is still) known locally as 'The Stowage'. Working docks along the Thames are a short walk from the Stowage and according to legend smugglers had stored precious goods there in the days when Deptford had been a bustling international port.[1]

Simultaneously, in anticipation of the impending war, funding to maintain the nursery was aided by a national drive for childcare that would allow women to undertake work outside the home during World War I, and the sisters approached the Ministry of Munitions via the Board of Education, offering to take the children of women working in munition factories. For this, the school received a grant of 7d (3p) a day for each child of a munition worker.[2] The nursery opened its doors in late March 1914 and 'there were thirty children in attendance' (Lowndes, 1960, p. 68).

'During World War I, when the number of officially sponsored public nurseries reached 175, the aim had been to release women for work in munition factories while providing day care for their pre-school children where social need was greatest' (Whitebread, 1972, p. 77). With the unemployment rates soaring, living conditions deplorable, and men and women desperate for work, Deptford most definitely fell into the category of great social need. 'The physical framework of Margaret's open-air nursery school was often called "Darkest Deptford" or "Dreary Deptford". This Metropolitan borough covered an area of 1,563 acres. It had 53 miles of dingy streets' (Bradburn, 1989, p. 36).

During World War I, Deptford was a prime target for the German Zeppelins, partly due to its proximity to the Woolwich Arsenal and the Army Service Corps, five miles along the Thames, and partly due to the working docks along the Thames border of Deptford. Margaret and Rachel suffered personally in trying to manage through the troubled time of conflict. It was 1915 and:

> They [Rachel and Margaret] were sitting in the dining-room at Evelyn House when the second raid came. The shutters were down, and they sat in the darkness, listening. There was a dreadful explosion and a smothered noise, then a wild knocking. All the new nurses were at the door, one was crying. A bomb had struck a

> neighbour's, the mother was dead and the three children.
> (Cresswell, p. 143)

Rachel and Margaret were not deterred. '[They] put up three large shelters and opened [their] gates to children of any age between one month and fourteen years' (Lowndes, p. 68). However, the nursery did struggle with staff leaving suddenly, without notice due to fear of the bombings, having been bombed out of their homes, the need to tend to wounded family members and families lives being shattered by the bombings and casualties overseas. It was a common occurrence that 'Mothers would come running to the Nursery: "Let the children come home, Nurse. Their father's missing"' (Cresswell, pp. 142-143).

The staff hired to work in the nursery were often people who literally turned up at the door of the nursery looking for work.

> All kinds of queer [*sic*] people helped to run the Baby Camp [Nursery] – some of them staying the course for only a few weeks. There were young girls who had just left school, delicate girls who had been advised to work in the open air, nurses who were too old for hospital work and an occasional retired teacher.
> (Lowndes, 1960, p. 69)

The war impeded any attempt to pursue references or gain background information on applicants for work in the nursery and Rachel and Margaret frequently hired the staff in good faith that they would have the best interests of the children and the nursery at heart. Because of staff shortages, the Camp became increasingly difficult to run and extra strain fell on the two sisters. 'Margaret's staff became birds-of-passage; some didn't even bother to give notice, they just disappeared' (Bradburn, 1989, p. 152). Although they trained a number of young girls as nursery assistants, they were constantly in need of additional help. One teacher who applied for a job there at this time tells of her experiences:

> In November 1914 I went to Deptford to be interviewed by Miss Margaret McMillan who wanted a teacher to run her Babies' Camp. I found a tall rather ungainly woman with a large rather heavy face, sallow complexion, and big luminous eyes ... I think she told me a little about the Camp ... but what I do remember clearly is that she brought the interview to an end by saying, 'I don't know anything about you but I like your face'. (Bradburn, 1989, p. 141)

The war continued and the nursery remained open throughout. Neither of the sisters escaped the War unscathed. With bombing increasing in 1917, 'on the night of the great Zeppelin raid in 1917 ... Margaret was poisoned by gas from the bombs' (Lowndes, 1960, p. 69). The effects of the poison plagued her for the rest of her life. However, for Margaret, the most devastating tragedy during the war was the loss of her dear sister. Rachel McMillan died on her birthday, 25 March 1917. Although it is not clear of what she died, the stressors of the

bombings, effect of poison and gas from the bombs, and caring for the children and families affected by the war certainly contributed to her early death. Rachel and Margaret were very close and their dream of creating a space for young children living in slum conditions to play in the outdoors, having nutritious meals and clean clothes had only just been realised. Margaret was determined to pursue their dream by keeping the nursery open and serving the needs of the children and families of the deprived Deptford slums. In the summer of 1917 the School was extended and the new buildings opened by the Minister of Education, Mr H.A.L. Fisher, on 3 August. As a tribute to the hard work and ideals of her deceased sister, the school was renamed by Margaret as the Rachel McMillan Nursery.

The nursery continues today on the same property with many of the same buildings serving the needs of the young children and families in the Deptford community. There continues to be an emphasis placed on outdoor learning, with the indoor space still referred to as shelters. Teachers and support staff are very knowledgeable about educating and caring for young children and work in teams to provide the best support for individual children and their families.

Early Years Teacher Education

The Rachel McMillan Training College emerged from the nursery being a training centre for early years teachers. It was McMillan's view that there would be no future for the growing number of nursery schools in England without carefully trained teachers and workers. McMillan had difficulty recruiting teachers to work in the nursery because of a lack of understanding the need for teaching young children. She realised that nursery schools could grow only if there were sufficient well trained teachers to staff them. McMillan (1919, p. 12) wrote that:

> So confused, so blind indeed was the general view on this whole subject, that many people supposed that training of any kind was unnecessary – that any kind of nice, motherly girl would do for a nursery teacher. Nurseries were to be, in other words, a dumping ground for the well-intentioned but dull women of today.

It is important to note that McMillan exclusively recruited only women to train to teach not only because of the prevailing Victorian and Edwardian perspective that women naturally had the capacity to care for and educate children and the Froebelian philosophy that young children should learn at the knee of their mother (female teacher) at the hearth of the kitchen. More importantly her Christian Socialist ideals led her to believe that working class women attaining training to teach would allow them the opportunity to develop a career with opportunity for growth rather than settling for low-paying, unskilled labour positions.

In England, up until the Education Act 1918, Grant Regulations No. 6, there was little notice taken of the need for early years settings for children

under the age of five years. At most, any education act up to this point merely acknowledged that young children were attending elementary schools, but did very little to acknowledge a need to create wide spread provision for children under the age of five. McMillan battled continuously with the general public to accept nursery schools as desirable and the training of teachers for them as necessary (Bradburn, 1989). The Education Act 1918 was ground breaking in that it stated a need for the creation of more nursery schools and the aims of a nursery school were to include 'definite training – bodily, mental and social – involving the cultivation of good habits in the widest sense, under the guidance and oversight of a skilled and intelligent teacher' leading to a widespread focus on educating future teachers for young children. Further, this Act maintained that young children would be supported by 'women who possess qualifications and experience for the training and teaching of young children'. Money was allocated to local education authorities (LEAs) who were instructed to 'encourage persons in their [nursery schools] employment to obtain, if they do not already possess, qualifications for work in elementary and other schools and departments for young children'. Nursery schools were intended to be separate institutions from infant schools, but could be settings attached to other organisations such as a day nursery or infant department of a state-funded school.

The Education Act 1921 made provision for grants to organise nursery schools for children over two years old and under five years old to be disseminated by, and overseen by, LEAs. With this in mind, Margaret McMillan was instrumental in contributing to the national approach to educating teachers of young children. McMillan officially trained teachers initially in the open-air nursery in Deptford from 1919. In 1923, the Nursery School Association (NSA) was established and McMillan was voted in as president of the organisation. She led the group in determining guidelines for early years teacher education in England. Members of the NSA respected each other's ideals for early years teacher education, but McMillan differed in her ideals of that training. 'McMillan's insistence on economies of scale and a schooling that acknowledged the pattern of working-class life, brought her into conflict with the Nursery School Association (NSA)' (Steedman, 2004-2014). Further, in anticipation of more nursery schools opening and a need for staffing of these settings, the NSA drafted a letter to the Hon. Charles P. Trevelyan - Minister of Education in spring 1924 stating that:

> We are looking for a steady increase of Nursery Schools throughout the country. When these new schools are started their success in any true sense will depend (even more than in schools of an older tradition) on actual teachers who work in them. It is natural enough that at present few people outside the workers themselves know very much about what the internal working of a nursery school must be it if is to prove of lasting value to the children. It is therefore of critical importance to the future of the nursery school movement that wise

> measure be taken now to insure the necessary proportion of skilled and trained workers. (NSA, 1924)

McMillan was passionate about the importance of well 'trained' teachers as she felt that children were being 'cheated' by being subjected to those who were inadequately trained. In her opinion, the proposed programme of two years with two teaching practices was insufficient and she believed that the job of educating young children could not be achieved without more rigorous and extensive training. According to McMillan 'they [teacher trainees] should have three years sound practice in teaching before they are allowed to be responsible for the education of children' (McMillan, 1927, p. 115). McMillan was quoted in the minutes of the NSA meeting, in reference to creating a standardised teacher training programme, as not supporting or agreeing to the two-year course of study.

The candidates considered for teacher training were also a point of contention between the NSA and McMillan. In a NSA meeting held on 3 January 1925, Wark, a member of the Board of Education stated that:

> We must be very careful to have teachers properly trained for this important period of school life. A girl with a secondary education and a motherly heart is not enough. At the age we have the great habit-forming period, and the younger the child is, the more rapid is his intellectual growth. This, then, requires the skill of the wisest and best teachers we have. (Ward, 1925)

McMillan spoke in response to this statement and was summarised in the minutes as having said that:

> all the members [of the Nursery School Association] had the same object in view – the ideal education of the child under five. In her opinion, however, the nursery class was in danger, vitiating the real aim and refusing the very people, who with widely differing qualifications, might as students help in the work. The nursery school needed an attendant to every six children, and it needed to have large numbers of children, with students of every type under trained teachers to provide the right care and adequate culture at a reasonable cost. She considered the nursery class an extravagant investment failing to provide a good return. (NSA, 1925, p. 2)

In the beginning, only a few women enrolled in the training programme offered at the nursery. In 1921, McMillan was elected to the London County Council for Deptford and campaigned against untrained teachers, seeking a budget from the council. In the same year, 30 student teachers, to include Abigail Adams Eliot, a Bostonian sent to Deptford to train with Margaret McMillan and learn about nursery education, were studying at the training centre and nursery or 'The College' as it was called. An emphasis was placed on individual tutoring and the students were housed in ramshackle buildings near The College.

Instruction for the students had to commence in rooms at the nursery school as there was no other space available. McMillan was driven to help the students 'learn what young children could do, what help they needed, what attitude toward them brought best results and what makes up a young child's day' (Eliot, 1921, p. 2).

The programme of study in The College reflected McMillan's ethos of caring for the whole child, involving parents and the community in the education of young children, and the need for specially trained teachers of young children. McMillan's philosophy envisaged that the syllabus should always include aspects of community work as she was preparing students to deal not merely with childhood, but with environment. She viewed young children as needing education and care, which were inseparable, and the specially trained teachers as teacher-nurses. She espoused that 'a nursery teacher is dealing with a brain and a soul even if she's dealing with a nose and a lip' (McMillan, 1919, p. 243). In her view, focus needed to be placed on applying theory to practice – health and hygiene pre-empted cognitive development. The ideal of a teacher-nurse was often challenged by student teachers. McMillan wrote of her response to the opposition:

> The teachers stand a little aghast. This nurture is very well but it is not their business! ... The teacher of little children is not merely giving lessons. She is helping to make a brain and a nervous system and this work which is going on to determine all that comes after, requires a finer perception and a wider training and outlook than is needed by any other kind of teacher. (p. 175)

The common practice of a mechanistic transmission of knowledge with children of the time was not suitable for young children according to McMillan, and the teacher must be a person of real skill and vision (McMillan, 1919).

McMillan was adamant that a three-year teacher training programme was the minimum amount of time a woman would need to be prepared to teach young children. She took issue with the accepted practice of a two-year or even one-year programme:

> What about the training of teachers? How are they going to learn their job-teaching? Can they master it by going to college for two years and giving lessons in a school for a few weeks? I have no hesitation in saying such training is quite inadequate. (McMillan, 1926, cited in Bradburn, 1989, p. 206)

She rejected and resented the idea that some colleges inserted a 'few lessons' related to the development and learning of young children as if it were adequate training for future teachers of young children to meet the needs of developing minds and bodies (McMillan, 1919).

The training at The College was quite different from that at other teacher training programmes of the era. Most teacher training programmes emphasised theory which was disseminated before any practical experience and with the

assumption that children did not live in deprivation or slums. McMillan repeatedly encountered trained teachers who could not cope with the poverty of the community, falling into despair when confronted with large classes of deprived children. Student teachers in The College began working with children immediately, rather than studying theory. It was not until the second and third year of study that students began working with theory, equipped with 'a thousand memories to give it [theory] new interest' (McMillan, 1919, p. 19). By beginning their course of study through engaging with the children in the nursery before considering theory, the students could make connections between the academic literature and discussions and the practical unfolding of young children's learning. McMillan trusted the existing teachers in the nursery to teach well and give student teachers a thorough training. Most members of her staff were well-schooled in the principles and practices of Froebel – the apostle of play. They were experienced teachers who were allowed to work out their own preferred teaching styles, providing they kept her main goals in mind. Those who knew her said she was a 'genius at getting others to work for her' (Bradburn, 1989, p. 192).

Students who enrolled in McMillan's training college were often wealthy, well educated women who embarked on the training as a social mission (Steedman, 1990). McMillan also welcomed young girls to train as teachers' helpers, which eventually was a point of contention with the ethos of the NSA and their recommendations for early years teacher training. As these student teachers were dedicated to the social cause of fighting deprivation and poverty in Deptford, the ramshackle housing they were offered was taken in stride and without complaint although accommodations were far inferior to their prior experiences. Steedman (1990) suggests that the legacy of Froebelian thought led to the decision and practice of early years education being an 'educational mission for women' (p. 83). This view influenced McMillan as she embraced similar ideals to those of Froebel in respect of love and nurture characteristics as the basics of early years education. McMillan felt she would be affecting social change through enabling women to knowledgably work with young children.

The curriculum organised by McMillan included a balance of carefully considered foci and the three-year programme provided study in: principles, practice and history of education; health and physical education; needs and interests of children in relation to the nursery, infant and junior school ages; and spoken and written English. The first year of study included: music; bookcraft; handiwork; needlework; art; pottery; environmental studies; weaving; English language and literature; history; divinity; and biology. In the second year, a specialisation was chosen and visits for observations made at different types of schools including: special schools; health centres and clinics; museums, galleries, and exhibitions. While in the third year, observations and lectures continued and there were examinations at the end of this year to include: theory of education, general and special including health education; class teaching; physical education; and specialist subject. Much of these foci are still included in contemporary early years teacher education. McMillan had a vision of

appropriately trained staff who were confident and able to support children and their families, teaching in open-air nurseries all over England (Giardiello, 2014).

The final step towards McMillan attaining her dream of offering young children a sound education was the building of a training college specifically designed for educating early years teachers. Using her network of social connections, she managed to obtain financial and political support, mainly through Nancy Astor and from Lloyds of London, who helped secure land and resources for new buildings in Creek Road, Deptford, connecting to the existing nursery, that opened to continue to train nurses and teachers. The Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College, named in honour of her late sister, was opened on 8 May 1930 by Queen Mary, a year before Margaret's death. Students took a three-year full-time course leading to a Froebel Certificate.

Contemporary teacher education echoes the ideals of Margaret McMillan in the BA Education programmes that offer a three-year course of study. The Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in teacher education, however, is typically a one year of full time study or two years for part time study. McMillan most likely would take issue with a course of study for less than three years. Men and women are encouraged to pursue an early years newly qualified teacher (NQT) programme in present-day. However, during McMillan's era and into the late 1960s, only women were admitted onto an early years teacher education programme. It would be interesting to know how McMillan would receive the idea of males enrolling in early years teacher education.

Conclusion

The foundations of early years provision and teacher training in England are largely credited to the dedication and determination of Margaret and Rachel McMillan. They were passionate about creating opportunities for working class young children and their families in hopes that the cycle of poverty and deprivation could be severed. They believed a specialist teacher was necessary and that young children deserved the expertise of a professional who was educated to understand and nurture their minds, bodies and spirits. Each spent her life in the pursuit of offering young children a high quality learning environment provided by dedicated teachers attuned to their specific developmental needs and interests.

Notes

[1] http://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Reflection-Jarvis.pdf

[2] http://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/mcmillanoans.html

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