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Article

# Margaret McMillan's Contributions to Cultures of Childhood

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**Abstract:** Margaret McMillan is widely known for her open-air nursery, making it her life mission to live by the McMillan family motto, *Miseris Succurrere Disco*, which translates to 'I endeavour to care for the less fortunate'. Margaret and her sister, Rachel, dedicated their lives to improving living conditions for the poor and working class in England and created health and dental clinics for them in Bradford, Bow and Deptford. During the 1889 Dock Strike, Margaret and Rachel supported workers by marching and demonstrating at Parliament. At the turn of the last century, they were instrumental in inspiring legislation for children's welfare and education on both local and national levels in England. Their efforts led to campaigning for the 1906 Provision of School Meals Act and medical inspections for primary school children. In an effort to improve health conditions for the children living in the Deptford community, they created night camps for deprived children in 1908. With war impending in 1914, they created the first open air nursery in England in order to serve the disadvantaged community surrounding it, providing a safe and nurturing learning environment for the young children of the women going to work in place of the men who were called up to war. Margaret McMillan's ideals for young children's nurture and education continue to influence how we educate children in contemporary England and are woven into the fabric of our goals for young children's futures.

**Keywords:** early-years education history; open-air nursery; early-years education

## 1. Introduction

Christian Socialists in the 19th century organised in response to the political, economic, social and religious developments in the mid-Victorian period with the intent of reducing inequalities within society in general. At the heart of Christian Socialism was a commitment to collectivism and cross-class cooperation, avoiding proposals or policies (Williams 2016), rather than engaging in the competition driven by an industrialist society. As Christian Socialists, Rachel and Margaret McMillan focused their efforts on improving the lives of the poor and working class of England, concentrating their attention on young children to prepare them for a better future. By establishing health and dental clinics for people living in deprivation in Bradford, Bow and Deptford, campaigning for the 1906 Provision of School Meals Act and creating night camps for deprived children in Deptford in 1908, they took steps to improve the life chances of children who might otherwise find themselves caught in a cycle of poverty.

"At the end of the 19th century, childhood acquired a new significance. Children—especially working-class children—became symbols of social hope, of a better and healthier future, of individuality and selfhood" (Steedman 1990, foreword). The demands of industrialization meant that children became a resource—cheap labour in factories and mines to perform simple tasks at a lower wage than an adult would earn (Griffin 2014). However, the Boer War led to the discovery that through medical inspections, "one third of volunteers was unfit for military service. It appeared that the physical condition of the working class male prevented him from fighting, as well as working effectively in his

job" (BBC 2019). A new perspective of children and their health and welfare became a societal focus with the establishment of The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), which was founded in 1889, and earlier, in 1870, the Education Act became the foundation for compulsory education for all children. A shift from viewing children as little adults led to them going to school instead of working. Children became a national resource that required a healthy upbringing so that they might be fit for work and military service.

In March of 1914, the threat of World War I (WWI) was impending, and the McMillan sisters launched the opening of their open-air nursery for the youngest children living in the tenements of Deptford. At the turn of the last century, this area of London experienced extreme deprivation with a shortage of space, clean and affordable housing and few well-paid jobs (Bradburn, *issues children and 1976*). Families were living in an overcrowded and congested community with a lack of infrastructure to support the dense population, leading to children experiencing a host of untreated health issues and social deficits, which the McMillan sisters were determined to address so that these children could have the childhood they deserved. The nursery was designed to provide these children with a chance to experience clean clothing and healthy food and have space to learn in fresh air, allowing them a start in life that could change the trajectory of their future.

## 2. Biographical Information

Margaret and Rachel spent their childhood in upstate New York, taking advantage of the plethora of outdoor space surrounding their home. Margaret describes their childhood:

It is a very happy life. Our parents are modern and American in their ideas of how we shall be brought up. They impose no needless restrictions on us, and do not overwhelm us with the Atlas of unreasoning and almighty authority- and yet we are not left to the mercy of impulse and riot of selfish instinct. (McMillan 1927, p. 10)

This idyllic start to life was the impetus for the McMillan sisters to offer a similar start to children living in deprivation in South East London. Unlike many children of their era, the McMillan sisters had the freedom of play and movement outdoors. Children in England were expected to work the land or labour in factories, often living in harsh conditions in large cities. Their childhood in America shaped who these women became and what they believed they could offer young children living in deprivation. Their young lives changed dramatically, leading to their convictions in adulthood about the experiences a young child needed.

Tragedy befell the McMillan family when their father and younger sister, Elizabeth, passed away from illness. Margaret also had the illness that took the lives of their sister and father, and although she survived, she suffered from significant hearing loss that was not restored until she was around 14 years of age. The loss was devastating for their mother who took the girls back to Scotland to live with the McMillan family. Their mother felt she needed family support to raise the girls and offer them a better life than she could provide on her own. Margaret wrote: "So, in September [1865], we three went on board the good ship City of Boston, for Liverpool, en route for Inverness" (McMillan 1927, p. 12).

Despite these setbacks, Rachel and Margaret received a good education in Scotland. Margaret, however, found living with her family in Scotland to be restrictive and resented the strictness imposed on her. Gratefully leaving Scotland when she was 18 years old, she studied humanities subjects in Germany before becoming a governess for various wealthy families there. These experiences offered Margaret an opportunity to understand the resources afforded to children of affluent families, and she began formulating her ideas for changing the lives of working-class children. Additionally, having been introduced to people of influence, she learned to use her oratory and personal skills to gain the resources she needed from these influential people to create social change in her endeavours to improve the lives of working-class families.

Toward the end of the 1800s, Margaret needed a change from working for the wealthy elite in Germany and moved to London. At the same time, Rachel, in Scotland caring for her ailing

grandmother, discovered Christian Socialism, educating herself through publications by William Morris (a socialist activist associated with the British Arts and Crafts Movement) and William Thomas Stead (a pioneer of investigative journalism), and after July 1888, she joined her sister in London. Here, she converted Margaret to Christian Socialism, and together, they attended political meetings, where they met influential socialist activists William Morris, H. M. Hyndman (who launched Britain's first left-wing political party), Peter Kropotkin (a proponent of a decentralised communist society free from central government), William Stead (noted for reportage on child welfare, social legislation and reformation of England's criminal codes) and Ben Tillett (British socialist, trade union leader and politician). The McMillan sister's involvement in the Christian Socialist movement challenged the child labour of working-class children, their exploitation and the abuse they experienced. Factory owners in the Victorian Era put profit before safety, and children were expected to work twelve-hour days—the same as adults. Children often worked in dangerous conditions, leading to injury if not death, and were not paid well because of their age. Although there was legislation attempting to address the exploitation of children in the work force (1833 Factory Act, Mines and Collieries Act 1842, 1844 Factory Act and the Factory Act of 1847 (Ten Hours Act)), children continued to be employed to work long hours in poor conditions (Griffin 2014). In an attempt to actively engage with their Christian Socialist views of addressing social inequalities, Rachel and Margaret engaged in the 1889 London Dock Strike, marching and protesting at Parliament. Margaret's activities for social change led to membership in the Fabian Society, the Labour Church, the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) (Steedman 1990). Rachel was incensed about the working class and "their stunted opportunities, their poor pay roused in her a storm of feeling that could not but find some outlet in action" (McMillan 1917, p. 170). Margaret continued her efforts to create change by teaching young women in the East End, publicly speaking out about the need for addressing social inequalities and using investigative journalism (inspired by William Thomas Stead) to publish her ideals of creating social change (Steedman 1990).

Margaret secured a position on the Bradford School Board as a representative in November 1894, quickly becoming renowned as an active social reformer with a specific interest in child welfare. She was re-elected to the school board in 1900, but the 1902 Education Bill soon became law, eradicating school boards and giving control and management of primary schools to the district and county councils. Women were no longer eligible to be elected to these councils, and Margaret lost her position and power to create social change. Although disappointed, Margaret joined Rachel, a health and hygiene teacher, in Bromley, London.

"It was she [Rachel] who gave me [Margaret] the first impulse to social work, and pointed out to me the wrongs of the disinherited, the landless, the child-labourer" (McMillan 1917, p. 170). In the interest of addressing children's health, in 1906, Margaret and Rachel canvassed for compulsory medical inspections of school children (McMillan 1927, p. 118), which was subsequently realised in the Education (Administrative Procedures) Bill of 1907. This bill led to the establishment of a children's health nurse in all primary schools to track children's health while in school. Noting the poverty and subsequent health issues in Deptford, they established community health and dental clinics in this suitably 'needy' area of London in which Margaret had been a manager of primary schools and had become familiar with the community and the challenges they faced. In her attempt to break the cycle of poverty, she envisioned offering children a healthy lifestyle. The McMillan sisters used their connections to secure housing on Evelyn Street in Deptford, first to establish health clinics for the working poor in the immediate community and then to create night camps for girls from ages 6–14 in 1908, where they were provided with a hot evening meal, bathing facilities and clothes washing and a cot to sleep outdoors. This afforded them the advantage of fresh air and nutritious food they would not receive in their family abode. With the huge success of this initiative, they expanded this service to local boys as well, encouraging them to leave the crowded and unhealthy tenements in which they lived every evening for a healthier alternative, making sure everyone had hot nutritious food, clean clothing and bedding.

### 3. Context

Deptford in 1899 was a bleak and dismal area in South East London where labourers flocked in the hopes of gaining stable employment in the bordering dockyards or the Woolwich arsenal. Unfortunately, there were more workers than jobs, leading to cramped, congested streets, inadequate housing and rampant poverty. Rather than acquiring gainful employment, these hopeful individuals became “occasional labourers, loafers and semi-criminals” (Fried and Elman 1969, p. 9). In 1899, Booth wrote “There is struggling poverty, there is destitution, there is hunger, drunkenness, brutality and crime” (Fried and Elman 1969, p. 4).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the streets where the nursery was located were described as follows:

From the corner of High St. a new road has been cut through to Creek Rd, continuous with Evelyn Street, the road on which the nursery is located and where the McMillan sisters lived), involving demolition of a great part of Wellington St. and Queen St. It is named Creek Road. Land is cleared and the LCC (London County Council) advertise it ‘to let’ except a plot near east end where a new Deptford Fund House is being erected. (Steele 1996, p. 137)

This land that the LCC offered ‘to let’ was locally referred to as “the Stowage”, which the McMillan sisters rented to establish their nursery.

According to Steele (1996), “Of all the pre-occupations of the late-Victorian period, prostitution rank[ed] highly” (p. 12), and Deptford was no exception. In his notebooks documenting the neighbourhoods of London, Booth described Deptford as inhabited by “casters [market hawkers], prostitutes and nightly fights” (Steele 1996, p. 11). Booth’s general remarks about Deptford in 1899 stated that “Most of the people living here work at one of the factories along the Creek. Beside the Chemical works, there are numerous business places employing a large number of ‘hands’ (Steele 1996, p. 139). When Margaret and Rachel moved to Deptford, they encountered similar, if not worse, conditions, as Booth observed. In descriptions of walks taken, Booth evokes images of the people he encountered in the street: “... some casters and prostitutes, shoeless children running about and frowsy women gaping at the doors” (Steele 1996, p. 137). It was these shoeless children that the McMillan sisters encountered when they moved to Deptford and for whom they opened the clinic on Evelyn Street in the early 1900s. The sisters had grave concerns for these children, noting that they were playing in crowded and congested streets and living in crowded and insanitary conditions with nowhere safe to play and spend their time. What they envisioned for them was a similar setting in which they were raised in the United States—fresh air, healthy food and plenty of space and time for freely chosen outdoor play.

Margaret’s work as a school board visitor was, according to Booth (Fried and Elman 1969, p. 3) to “perform amongst them a house-to-house visitation; every house in every street is in their books, and details are given of every family with children of school age”. It was through this work that Margaret gained insight into the plight of the young children living in tenement housing in Deptford and the dire need to support them in order to break the cycle of poverty. This was also how she was made aware of the property that was being let by the LCC when she and Rachel were considering opening the nursery. Booth stated that “The children are the street arabs [sic], and are to be found separated from the parents in pauper or industrial schools” (Fried and Elman 1969, p. 12), offering a succinct and miserable outlook on childhood and children’s futures in this area of South East London. The McMillan sisters set out to change this.

As noted above, the piece of land that the McMillan sisters rented for their nursery was referred to by the locals as ‘the Stowage’, and this label continues to be used in contemporary times. Up until the mid-1800s, there were working docks along the Thames, a short walk from the Stowage, and according to local history, illegally acquired goods from the docks were stored on this property. Simultaneously, in anticipation of the impending war (WWI), funding to maintain the nursery was aided by a national drive for childcare that would allow women to undertake work outside the home as part of the war

effort, and the sisters approached the Ministry of Munitions via the Board of Education, offering to care for the children of women working in munitions factories. For this service, the nursery received a grant of 7d (3p)<sup>1</sup> a day for each child of a munition worker. The nursery opened its doors in late March of 1914, and “the children who first entered the camp-87 in all-the eldest was five, and the youngest three months old” came from the surrounding community in Deptford (McMillan 1917, p. 51). The nursery was the step forward that the McMillan sisters envisioned to improve the lives of the young children whom they deemed worthy of enjoying a healthy childhood with access to fresh air, a nourishing diet and supportive adults in an educational environment encouraging child-directed, outdoor play.

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 improve the lives of the working poor, particularly the children living in the tenement slums around the docks and throughout Deptford by offering young children a healthier start in life.

#### 4. The McMillans’ Views of Childhood

Victorian English society had specific ideals for young children, and their definition of childhood was limited and limiting. Historical accounts of Victorian childhood include “little children who should be seen and not heard, under-tens slaving away in cotton factories and coal mines” (Cunningham 2006, p. 140). “In the late nineteenth century, and in the years up to the First World War, childhood was reconceptualised in British society—that is to say, children became the subjects of legislative attention and formed the basis of various accounts of social development as they had not done before” (Steedman 1990, p. 62). In the century before Margaret began working to improve the childhoods of the working-class, intense concentration had been focused on working-class children at different points, including them in government policy. Building on the campaigning for the 1906 Provision of School Meals Act, Margaret noted that the children whose lives they hoped to improve were victims of a system in which “Poverty of experience or impressions—whether from the closure of any gate of sense, or through any other cause—induce[d] a permanent and irremediable weakness in the mental life” (McMillan 1900, p. 8) of the young child. The population of children living in such deprivation was experiencing the outcomes of the “unprecedented speed of the economic and social changes in Britain consequent to the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth . . . The cities and towns grew at an exponential rate, creating enormous social problems, not least for the children” (Cunningham 2006, p. 140). These children had little joy in their stunted childhood and were expected to enter the labour force at very early ages.

In the early 1900s, Ruskin described a walk he took in the area, looking at the children playing in the streets “and consider[ing] ‘the marvel [of] . . . how the race resists, at least in its childhood, influences of ill-regulated birth, poisoned food, poisoned air and soul neglect’” (Ruskin 1906, p. 390). In Deptford as a whole, the infant mortality rates in 1909 and 1910 were 104 and 124 per thousand. However, in the east ward (Margaret’s main catchment area) in the same years, they were 136 and 189 per thousand; that is, roughly one-fifth of the children born in this ward did not survive their first year of life (McMillan 1927, p. 37).

In order to combat such a waste of human potential, Margaret drew on her own experiences of a rural childhood without want and with woods in which to run and play. This gave her a clear vision of what she wanted for the children of Deptford:

She [Margaret] realized that poverty, ignorance and disease were not only harming an adult population, but mortgaging the growth of the next generation also. She yearned to change the system which created the conditions she abhorred. At the same time she realized that sick children could not wait for political reform. She fought to cure the dirt and disease that

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<sup>1</sup> 7d was 7 pence which translates into 3 pence in contemporary money.



she saw every day in the mothers and children round her, and the fight for political reform as well. (Bradburn 1976, pp. 45–46)

Rejecting the Victorian view that children need to conform to quiet complacency, Margaret reflected Froebelian ideals, asserting that “the first years are years of opportunity. If during those years good fundamental impressions are made, muscle and nerve is trained, dormant faculties roused, right habits formed, and the whole nervous system rendered capable of full exercise, and fine nutrition, then the power to do well is acquired” (McMillan 1900, p. 35). In the era in which the McMillan sisters hoped to create change for these young children’s lives, they attempted to remedy a historical childhood of child labour, child exploitation and child abuse. Margaret and Rachel envisioned ideal early years for young children, characterized by experiences involving unlimited outdoor play, child-facilitated learning and nutritious food. Children would have access to medical attention as needed, and their health would be monitored regularly to ensure that they were growing and developing without the complications of unhealthy living in cramped housing with limited access to resources. The children in Deptford were plagued by recurring illnesses and lacked access to medical resources, sufficient food (particularly healthy food) and large, safe spaces to play, learn and develop.

### 5. The Nursery

Margaret and Rachel McMillan began their work in Deptford during the “revisionist Froebelian child-saving ideology” (Brehony, p. 185), inspired by their Christian Socialist affiliations rather than their familiarity with or convictions about Froebelian pedagogy. The following two Froebelian principles were reflected in Margaret and Rachel’s views of what the children living in poverty in Deptford deserved:

1. Childhood is seen as valid in itself, as part of life and not simply as preparation for adulthood. Thus education is seen similarly as something of the present and not just preparation and training for later.
2. The whole child is considered to be important. Health—physical and mental is emphasised, as well as the importance of feelings and thinking and spiritual aspects (Bruce 1987, p. 16).

They ruminated that “it is the open space that matters. Our rickety children, our cramped, and even (in many cases) deformed children, get back to the ear with its magnetic currents, and the free blowing wind” (McMillan 1917, p. 52). They envisioned opportunities for these urban children living in squalor and congestion: “To let them [children] live at last and have the sight of people planting and digging, to let them run and work and experiment, sleep, have regular meals, the sights and sounds of winter and spring, autumn and summer” (McMillan 1917, p. 52). Knowing that the young children living in poverty required their whole being to be considered, they envisioned that “Space, and more space, is what toddlers want. To move, to use their new power of getting about, is for them a tremendous experience” (McMillan 1917, p. 58). Their vision of offering a better childhood experience for these young children was spurred by their encounters with the children enrolling in the nursery:

Some children come to us crippled already by restraint. In some cases there is deformity even in the first and second years. The legs are bandy, or one leg drawn up; the wrists feeble through want of exercise; the head pushed forward, the mouth wide and hanging open. (McMillan 1917, p. 61)

Knowing that they could provide a better start in life for the deprived children in Deptford, the McMillan sisters were not daunted by seeing “Many [children] arrive at the nursery utterly stupefied by neglect” (McMillan 1917, p. 160).

With war impending, the McMillan sisters were able to gain funding from the government to provide nursery care for young children. World War I—with men being conscripted into the armed forces and the overwhelming number of casualties—created the need for married women with young children to be recruited to work in the ammunition factories in neighbouring Woolwich (the location

of the Royal Artillery since the 17th century, employing 80,000 workers during WWI). The needs of the war also led to these mothers being employed by rail services, driving public transport vehicles, nursing, working as mechanics for the Women's Royal Air and on farms in the Women's Land Army.

While these mothers worked, their children were offered a safe, nurturing learning environment that catered to the whole child, not just their minds. The expansive garden had trees for climbing, vegetable and flower gardens for tending, climbing structures for physical development and cots for children to have their afternoon nap in the fresh air.

Margaret felt strongly that teachers were the heart of young children's learning and development. "Teachers are the captains and the ammunition of the teaching world . . . we need . . . teacher-nurses, not mere 'minders' of children" (McMillan 1917, p. 159). Nursery education during the time that the McMillan sisters created their nursery was typically privately funded and fee-paying. The teachers in nurseries were often well intended women who had little background in children's learning and development. Margaret McMillan wrote:

In 1919 there were very few Nursery Schools of any kind, and no large open-air Nursery School that I know of other than our own. As for the training of teachers it was not even considered as yet, so confused, so blind indeed was the general view on this. Many people believed that training of any kind was unnecessary for a nursery teacher, just as they still believe that it is quite unnecessary for the woman who is a mother. Nursery Schools were to be a dumping-ground for the well intentioned but dull women of that day. (McMillan 1930, p. 4)

The McMillan sisters deliberately created a learning environment, situated in the community in which the children lived, that allowed them to explore learning in the outdoors with a play space overlooking the local community—the children's community. The nursery was designed to tackle the children's ongoing physical and mental health through daily baths, clean clothing, fresh air, play and three meals each day. Although the nursery drew on Froebel's influences and pedagogical approaches, the McMillans' ethos for teaching young children was less philosophical, and the focus went beyond cognitive education. "The nursery" (as it was known at that time) began with the ideals of supporting children's learning, as well as addressing the needs and development of the whole child. Similar to Froebel, their philosophy was that children learn by exploring and that they would achieve their full potential through first-hand experience and active learning. Unlike Froebel, there were no "gifts" or specific educative materials used to develop the children's understanding, although Margaret had very specific ideas of what resources the children required and what they needed to gain from their experiences. The sisters stressed the importance of free play, regularly through craft and water activities, with most learning transpiring in the outdoors—providing large and varied external areas for these investigations.

The nursery was organised to take advantage of the green space bordered by enclosed areas called shelters, where the children could go if they wanted to have a quieter area for learning. The community in which they lived was congested and overcrowded, and the garden space in which the children spent the majority of their learning time offered them a well-developed garden for exploring, playing and developing in the fresh air that was not afforded outside their learning environment (Bradburn 1976). Additionally, there was a roof-top play space to enable the children to view their surrounding community in contrast to the lush and nurturing learning environment. Included in the outdoor area were trees, a vegetable garden (which provided some of the food used in lunch and dinners), flowers, trees, pets, chickens to provide eggs for meals, climbing structures, a stage for plays and oration, trikes/bikes/scooters and a multitude of other materials for the children to explore and learn. The shelters bordering the garden provided indoor space for the children to play and learn, should they choose. The shelters offered more quiet space and protection from the extreme elements.

The nursery opened at 07:30, so that mothers could drop their children off on the way to their factory work. Most arrived between 08:00 and 09:00. Upon arrival, the children were each given a bath



and changed into nursery school clothing, which was washed every evening to be fresh for the next day. Every child was given a breakfast of very nourishing porridge and milk, sometimes accompanied by a piece of crusty bread, which was intended to help them strengthen their teeth through chewing. After breakfast, at 09:00, 'lessons' began. Morning hours saw the children engaged in their learning either in the garden or in the shelters, depending on the weather. Lunch was served between 11:30 and 12:00, with children over 3 years of age serving themselves from dishes passed around by a server (another child). Following lunch, the older children were responsible for clearing the tables and setting out the camp beds and blankets in the garden for the midday rest. After the midday rest, children engaged in free play, music and games, all overseen by teachers mentored by Margaret and Rachel. Before the children left for the day, they had a meal served at 16:00 to ensure that they all had the proper nourishment required for their development. Most children were collected by their mothers after their work, typically between 17:00 and 17:30 (Steedman 1990).

Margaret and Rachel planned the nursery day to promote all aspects of young children's development in addition to fostering good health, happiness and respect for others. Reflecting their ideals of Christian Socialists, "these were the characteristics, handed down from the philosophies of the enlightenment, that were deemed essential in ensuring children's wellbeing in adulthood and the production of a just and caring society" (Giardiello 2014, p. 63).

Margaret was passionate about the importance of well 'trained' teachers, as she felt that children were being 'cheated' by being subjected to inadequately educated teachers. In her opinion, the proposed teaching 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 more extensive training. Margaret 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. According to Margaret, the importance of the teacher's interactions with the child is not just the spoken language, because "the tone of the teacher is more to him [the child] than her [the teacher's] words" (McMillan 1900, p. 11).

Margaret's ethos for young children's learning was based on the firm belief that teachers of young children required a three-year teacher education programme in order to be fully prepared for the challenges of the job. "Margaret's experience with the teachers she encountered made her realise the urgent need for specific training for those who intended to work with the disadvantaged pre-school children. Consequently she decided to initiate courses for teachers and to use the Nursery School as an integral part of their training" (Bradburn 1976, p. 183). Many teachers in the nursery were educated to embrace the principles and practices of Froebel—the apostle of play. "Formal teaching is a very trivial matter in comparison with the vital education given through impressions" (McMillan 1900, p. 11). Eventually, in 1930, a year prior to her death, Margaret realised her dream of opening a teacher training school adjacent to the property on which the nursery was situated, and on 6 May 1930, Queen Mary formally opened the Rachel McMillan Training College.

## 6. Impact on the Provision of Early-Years Education

Provisions for young children's learning in England have continued to reflect the McMillan sister's ethos for young children living in deprivation and the McMillan family motto, *Miseris Succurrere Disco* (I learn to care for the unfortunate). Play is still at the heart of young children's education in the early-years foundation stage in that a reference learning environment and outdoor play are highly encouraged, reflecting the open-air ethos in the McMillan nursery. A focus on partnerships with families continues to be prioritised, providing continuity for young children (Early Years Foundation Stage).

The *Hadow Report* (1933) used the McMillan nursery as a benchmark for exemplary education for young children. In the introduction, the report states that "we have made particular reference to the teaching and practical achievement of that great exemplar of nursery education in England, Margaret McMillan" (p. xix).

An outline of experiences for young children's nursery education reflected the McMillans' ethos and the influence of Froebel's ideals for developmentally appropriate learning, stating that:

The daily programme of the school comprises a succession of happy and joyous pursuits and activities in which the distinction between work and play disappears. The children work when they think they are playing, and play when they think they are working. The educational influences in nursery schools derive largely from Froebel, Madame Montessori and Margaret McMillan. ([Hadow Report 1933](#), p. 104)

The [Hadow Report \(1933\)](#) also exemplified the need for young children to learn outdoors, asserting that "It is clearly essential that the nursery school should be placed within easy distance of the homes which it is intended to serve, and this consideration in practice imposes a limit on the possible size of the school" (p. 107). When extolling the virtues of outdoor learning, the report goes on to say:

Margaret McMillan, by substituting shelters in a garden for classrooms and a drab playground, demonstrated how the limitations imposed by [school] buildings and how this can be broken down. She believed that an open-air environment is of paramount importance for promoting the mental and physical development of children, and she proved that it is practicable to provide it in the very midst of a poor and crowded neighbourhood (p. 141).

At this time in history, the idea of the open-air nursery and careful consideration for young children's education reached the United States through the work of Abigail Adams Eliot, an American educator who became a leading authority on early childhood education after visiting England to study the growing nursery movement, which included studying with Margaret for three months in 1921. According to the [Hadow Report \(1933\)](#), "nursery schools, on the model of the McMillan School at Deptford, were established in considerable numbers in the United States after the close of the Great War" (p. 272).

In Britain, following World War II, the Education Act 1944 ([Butler Act 1944](#)) reiterated the need for nursery schools so that children under the age of five could benefit from the advantages offered by early-years education. The Education Act 1944 states that "a local education authority shall, in particular, have regard . . . to the need for securing that provision is made for pupils who have not attained the age of five years by the provision of nursery schools . . ." (p. 5). Although this provision was not compulsory for children under five years, its importance was acknowledged. The Butler Act went so far as to define what constitutes a nursery, saying "primary schools which are used mainly for the purpose of providing education for children who have attained the age of two years but have not attained the age of five years shall be known as nursery schools" (p. 6). Outlining what constitutes a nursery and ensuring that the local education authority would establish and maintain early-years education reiterated the importance placed on nursery education in the [Hadow Report \(1933\)](#).

In 1967, the Plowden Report was released, reiterating the need for and benefits of nursery education that the [Hadow Report \(1933\)](#) proffered. The Plowden Report examined the need to address deprivation through high-quality education and highlighted the advantages of nursery education. Reflecting the McMillan sisters' ethos of providing a well-designed, nurturing learning environment for children living in deprivation, the Plowden Report stated that:

part-time attendance at a nursery school is desirable for most children. It is even more so for children in socially deprived neighbourhoods. They need above all the verbal stimulus, the opportunities for constructive play, a more richly differentiated environment and the access to medical care that good nursery schools can provide (p. 63).

Additionally, as Margaret had hoped, the [Plowden Report \(1967\)](#) encouraged the development of nursery education to reach the socially deprived neighbourhoods that would most benefit from it. The report explicitly declares that "The expansion of nursery education should begin in the priority areas" (p. 67). The argument for nursery schools in the report goes on to name the McMillan sisters, saying:

From 1907 it became the policy of the Board of Education to encourage the exclusion from school of children under five, who were often attending in surprisingly large numbers, unless special arrangements could be made for them. One effect was to stimulate the foundation of nursery schools by private effort. Rachel and Margaret McMillan were outstanding among the pioneers. Nursery schools first became eligible for grant in 1919 but growth has been slow, although the last war gave them a temporary boost (pp. 99–100).

Clearly, the McMillan sisters had an impact on the consideration and development of nursery education and its provision beyond their era of influence.

In 2000, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) released Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage—a comprehensive guide for practitioners working with young children. This document again reflects the ethos and considerations of the McMillan sisters, setting out guidelines for outstanding education for young children. Similar to the McMillans, the aim of this document was “to provide a high quality, integrated early education and childcare service for all who want it” (QCA [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority](#), p. 3). Margaret McMillan was quite focused on making sure that teachers of young children were well educated and well informed about children’s development. The [Curriculum Guidance \(2000\)](#) reflects this, saying:

Effective education requires both a relevant curriculum and practitioners who understand and are able to implement the curriculum requirements. Effective education requires practitioners who understand that children develop rapidly during the early years—physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially (p. 14).

Similar to the [Plowden Report \(1967\)](#), the [Curriculum Guidance \(2000\)](#) emphasises the need for collaboration with families, stating that “Parents and practitioners should work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect within which children can have security and confidence” (p. 13). This resonates with the McMillan sisters’ ideals for supporting families whose children were enrolled in the nursery by visiting them in their homes and providing needed services to improve their lives. The guidance goes on to say that “The significant adults to whom children relate during the foundation stage expand from the family to include the practitioners in early-years settings. Children, their parents and practitioners need to develop positive relationships based on trust” (p. 22). This tenet of trust was the driving force of the McMillan nursery and led to the community embracing the sisters and the nursery as their own.

Again echoing the [Hadow Report \(1933\)](#) and the philosophy of the McMillan sisters, the [Curriculum Guidance \(2000\)](#) clearly espouses the benefits and need for children’s learning to take place outdoors:

Outdoor activities allow children to have real experiences for example, of weather, of creatures in their natural environment and of the buildings that surround them. It allows them to work on a large scale, such as in construction, water play and mapping (p. 85).

The principles of the open-air nursery are reflected here, establishing that real experiences outside of an enclosed classroom offers children an ideal opportunity to learn and grow through enjoyment and challenge.

Looking at more contemporary guidance for young children’s learning, the Tickell Report ([Tickell 2011](#)) encourages similar ideals to the McMillan sisters in addition to the abovementioned reports and guidance. It affirms “a strong start in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes in later life; a weak foundation significantly increases the risk of later difficulties” (p. 8), similar to what Margaret McMillan promoted. The Tickell Report ([Tickell 2011](#)) also promotes the importance of communication and connections with families: “The most important influences on children’s early development are those that come from home. Children benefit most when they experience the consistent support and presence of caring adults—carers, parents or other family

members—from the earliest possible age” (Tickell 2011, p. 8). These partnerships help ensure the future of a child’s educational experiences.

Currently, early-years education is guided by the Early Years Foundation Framework of 2017 (EYFS), which establishes standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years of age. Throughout the document, play is emphasised, highlighting that “Play is essential for children’s development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others” (Department for Education 2017, p. 8). This document, echoing the McMillans’ ideals about children’s learning outdoors, clearly expresses the need for open-air learning, saying that “providers must provide access to an outdoor play area or, if that is not possible, ensure that outdoor activities are planned and taken on a daily basis” (Department for Education 2017, p. 30). Over 100 years after the open-air nursery was established, we still acknowledge the benefits of children engaging in outdoor experiences.

Parent partnerships play a significant role in young children’s learning and development, and this is also a focus in the Department for Education (2017): “Practitioners should address any learning and development needs in partnership with parents and/or carers, and any relevant professionals” (p. 13). The framework clearly identifies the need for and importance of parent partnerships, stating that it seeks to provide “partnership working between practitioners and with parents and/or carers” (p. 5.), implying the need for trust between the adults who are the primary carers for young children. In a section outlining the learning and development requirements for young children, the framework defines what practitioners must do in order to work “in partnership with parents and/or carers, to promote the learning and development of all children in their care, and to ensure they are ready for school” (Department for Education 2017, p. 7).

In keeping with the work the McMillan sisters put into addressing young children living in poverty, the Labour Government (1997–2010) made early-years education a priority and released the Every Child Matters (ECM *Every Child Matters*) document, stating that they “increased the focus on prevention through the child poverty strategy, Sure Start, and our work to raise school standards” (p. 9). Additionally, similar to the McMillan sisters, the document acknowledged that “Parental involvement in education seems to be a more important influence than poverty, school environment and the influence of peers” (ECM *Every Child Matters*, p. 24). The ECM (*Every Child Matters*) also intends to “Tackle the key drivers of poor outcomes, including poverty, poor childcare and early years education, poor schooling and lack of access to health services” (p. 26). Recognising the need for access to health services reflects back to the health offices the McMillan sisters established even before opening the nursery.

An outcome of the Every Child Matters document was the establishment of Sure Start Children’s Centres that echo the education services offered by the McMillan sisters. “Sure Start children’s centres were designed to deliver a place in every community that would provide integrated care and services for young children and their families, with a particular focus on closing the achievement gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Bouchal and Norris 2012, p. 3). The idea that every community would benefit from a range of services offered in one centre mirrors the intentions of the McMillan sisters to provide care and education for children and their families. Similar to the sisters’ nursery, Sure Start Centres were designed to be a “key mechanism for improving outcomes for young children, thereby reducing inequalities, and helping to bring an end to child poverty” (Bouchal and Norris 2012, p. 4). The nursery that the McMillan sisters opened eventually became a Sure Start Centre.

Although Sure Start Centres reflect the ethos of the McMillan sisters by making “an attempt to reshape local service provision in an area where services had been fragmented and where many different professions would have to work together” (Bouchal and Norris 2012, p. 18), by 2008, funding and support from the government were gradually withdrawn. There was, at this time, a shift in power that saw a coalition government take leadership, and austerity measures ensued. As a result, funding for Sure Start Centres was drastically curtailed, demonstrating that children are still held hostage to adult fortune much as they were during the lifetime of the McMillan sisters.

## 7. Conclusions

Because of their Christian Socialist ethos, the McMillan sisters eventually primarily focused on the nursery setting to create social change for children, families and the community. By creating change for impoverished children, it was hoped that they would break the cycle of poverty and live better lives, to which they were entitled. The McMillans' considered approach to young children from economically deprived backgrounds and their families pioneered a practice that still inspires early childhood education in the United Kingdom (UK). They dedicated their lives to plan "an appropriate environment for children and give them sunshine, fresh air and good food before they became rickety and diseased" (Stevinson 1954, p. 8). Mansbridge sums up Margaret's work and influence:

She heard the call to work, she schemed, and planned and she succeeded. There is universal testimony, educational literature abounds with it, to the power of her redemptive action. Little children made straight, bounding into life, with bright eyes, attuned ears, sensitive touch and high spirits. The working mothers of Deptford, as they tell it, seem to be transformed; they speak of Margaret as one who did so much that she is, in the spirit still with them. The little children of the Nursery school returned to their homes as new creatures, inviting new conditions of feeding and treatment. All about them their elder sisters come from far, learn the magic and mystery of childhood, and go out to take other gardens in the midst of the slums. (Mansbridge 1932, pp. 82–83)

Margaret's dedication to improve the childhood experiences of the young children living in the squalor and deprivation of Deptford, London, led to the continuation of her ideals in contemporary early-years education. Her goal was for the nursery to be aspirational for children from socioeconomically deprived families, so the nursery was established to reflect the notion that:

The garden is essential matter. Not the lessons or the pictures or the talk. The lessons and talk are about things seen in the garden, just as the best of all the paintings in the picture galleries are shadows of originals now available to the children of the open air. Ruskin declares that all the best books are written in the country . . . Little children, as well as great writers, should be, if not in the country, at least in a place that is very like it . . . If not in great space with moorland or forest and lakes, at least in sunny places, not in foul air and grimy congestion. (McMillan 1930, p. 4)

Having spent her own early years in the bucolic bliss of upstate New York, she dedicated her life and career to replicating some of those experiences for young children who, without her and the nursery, would, most likely, never have had nutritious food, self-directed activities and a large garden in which to learn, develop and grow. Margaret's work with the young children of Deptford led to the adoption of her ideals and practices in the British Independent Labour Party and Labour Party policies of her era. The ideals and ethos of the McMillan sisters continue to inform our approaches to teaching young children, as highlighted in the reports and policy that have and continue to inform the provision of early-years education.

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