

# EARLY CHILDHOOD THEORIES

*Today*

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# 10

## MARGARET MCMILLAN AND GRACE OWEN

### NURSERY WARS: DEBATING AND DEFINING THE MODERN NURSERY

*By Pam Jarvis*

#### KEY DEFINITIONS

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<b>Nursery schools</b>	In today's world, we divide Early Years education and care into defined categories, such as day care, nursery class, nursery school, PVI playgroups, etc. In the early days of the NSA, all settings were labelled 'nursery schools'. Do you think this blurring of agendas exacerbated the arguments between McMillan and Owen?
<b>Froebelian practices</b>	While McMillan was a strong critic of the nursery classes supported by the Froebelians on the NSA, she was for many years actively involved in the Froebelian Society and wrote articles for their journals. <sup>1</sup> What do you understand as 'Froebelian practices'?
<b>Play-based learning</b>	We talk today of ' <b>play-based learning</b> ', a concept enthusiastically espoused by both McMillan and Owen. What differences would you identify in their emphases within this broad definition?
<b>Curriculum</b>	The concept of a ' <b>curriculum</b> ' for Early Years would have been quite alien to both McMillan and Owen, while in contemporary England in particular, it tends to be accepted as a conventional underpinning to Early Years practice. Do you think this has been a largely positive, negative or mixed development and why?

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## **INTRODUCTION: THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN BRITISH NURSERY**

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Modern Early Years education and care evolved in Britain across the latter half of the 19th century, as the effects of the Industrial Revolution became evident. The deprived conditions in which the urban poor existed fuelled a growing public concern about the poor health of inner-city children.<sup>2</sup> This became even more obvious following the instigation of compulsory state education for 5–10 year olds in 1870.<sup>3</sup>

The Charity Organisation Society (COS) was founded in London in 1869<sup>4</sup> triggering the emergence of middle-class female charity workers tasked to instil ‘good habits’ into working class mothers: ‘the benevolent and astute judgement of middle class women... was imagined to bring about the transformation of the character of the poor.’<sup>5</sup> As these previously sheltered and often unworldly women ventured into homes in the most deprived areas of industrial cities, it was somewhat inevitable, however genuine their intentions, that they would ‘frequently misread the survival strategies of the urban poor, in their belief that bourgeois domestic arrangements were the only current standard of home management’.<sup>6</sup> It was not long before many felt the impetus to extend their mission by drawing the preschool children of deprived families into a more ‘enlightened’ care and education regime that they (with the financial support of their donors) would seek to provide.

Those who created such regimes did not always agree on how they should be organised, however. The heated exchanges between Margaret McMillan (1860–1931) and Grace Owen (1873–1965), respectively the first president and first secretary of Nursery School Association (NSA) are an ideal example of this debate. Their documentation by their student, Abigail Adams Eliot (1892–1992) shines a fascinating light on how the organisation of the modern Early Years education and care was passionately debated and constructed.

## **THE CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST MISSIONARY: MARGARET MCMILLAN**

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The McMillan sisters were born in Westchester County New York, Rachel in 1859 and Margaret in 1860; however, following the death of the sisters’ father and youngest sister in 1865, their mother took them back to her family home in Inverness. By 1888, the sisters had become enthusiastic converts to Christian Socialism.<sup>7</sup> In 1889, they moved to London to begin their mission. Margaret began to build a reputation as a skilled orator, delivering speeches on the benefits of socialism at Hyde Park Corner.<sup>8</sup> She was consequently offered a salaried position by the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Bradford<sup>9</sup> delivering a programme of Socialist lectures to audiences across Yorkshire and Lancashire. She was elected to the Bradford School Board as a representative of the ILP in November 1894<sup>10</sup> and quickly realised that the conditions in under which children were required to attend school significantly added to their misery.

Many of the children worked half days in local mills, and most were poorly nourished, frequently infested with lice and ringworm, and in generally poor health. Much of this was caused by the extreme poverty of their families and a lack of even basic amenities, which meant that maintaining personal hygiene was fraught with difficulty. It was common for mothers to sew children into their clothes at the beginning of winter,<sup>11</sup> hoping that this would protect against colds and chills, meaning that neither the child nor the clothes were properly washed for many months.

Margaret McMillan took it upon herself to create an innovative health promotion programme operating within schools in the city. Consequently, Bradford became the first education authority in the country to provide baths and showers on school premises from 1897<sup>12</sup> and free school meals in 1902.<sup>13</sup> However, in 1902 a new education bill abolished the school boards, giving control and management of elementary schools to the District and County Councils to which women could not be elected.<sup>14</sup> Margaret, struggling with her bitter disappointment at the inability to continue with her programme,<sup>15</sup> decided to relocate to London,<sup>16</sup> moving in with Rachel who was working as a travelling teacher of health and hygiene.

The sisters continued to campaign for child health, and in 1907 their efforts led to the passing of a parliamentary bill stipulating the compulsory medical inspection of school children.<sup>17</sup> On the strength of this success, they managed to obtain a £5000 bursary to open a school clinic in a Deptford, South East London, which proved to be a great success.<sup>18</sup> But it quickly became something of a revolving door:

Nurse Spiker at the clinic said 'it's all a waste of time. These children come here, are cured and go but in two weeks, sometimes less they are back again. All these ailments could be prevented, their cause is dirt, lack of light and sun, fresh air and good food'.<sup>19</sup>

The McMillans consequently experimented with further projects that would allow them to provide a nurturing environment for local children that would proactively protect their health. The first venture was an overnight 'camp' in the garden of the house in which the clinic was located, where camp beds, washing facilities and a nutritious breakfast were provided for local children.<sup>20</sup>

A small 'camp school' for children aged 5–14 followed in 1912.<sup>21</sup> However, this soon ran into funding problems, and Margaret's attention turned towards providing a 'baby camp' for infants under five. She decreed: 'we must open our doors to the toddlers, Rachel... we must plan the right kind of environment for them and give them sunshine, fresh air and good food *before* they become rickety and diseased'.<sup>22</sup>

The sisters acquired suitable premises,<sup>23</sup> and the initiative which became locally known as 'the nursery' opened in 1914. They focused upon the provision of cleanliness, sunshine, fresh air, good food and plenty of time to play in the garden. Sadly, Rachel died during early 1917,<sup>24</sup> but as World War I drew to a close in 1918, the renamed 'Rachel McMillan Open Air Nursery School'<sup>25</sup> was proclaimed as a huge success, gaining local, national and international fame for its successes, with respect not only to vastly improved health in the children of the district but also to the superior intellectual and social development demonstrated in the children's behaviour and achievements. It was visited by a steady stream of dignitaries including Queen Mary, Rudolph Steiner, George Bernard Shaw, many MPs and the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin who wrote to McMillan: 'I shall never forget my visit to you and to your children; it was a revelation'.<sup>26</sup>

During the 1920s a range of national benefits that could be addressed through national public health initiatives were beginning to seem an achievable reality.<sup>27</sup> 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 and overseen by Local Education Authorities.<sup>28</sup> The establishment of the NSA followed in 1923, with Margaret McMillan as its first president.<sup>29</sup>

## THE PIONEERING PEDAGOGUE: GRACE OWEN

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Grace Owen (1873–1965) was elected as the first Honorary Secretary to the NSA,<sup>30</sup> becoming McMillan's closest colleague in one of the most ambitious Early Years care and education enterprises of all time: to shape the framework of a standard nursery school within Great Britain

as a whole. At this time, Owen was already 'a pivotal figure at the City of Manchester training school for nursery schoolteachers',<sup>31</sup> the concept of the nursery school being already 30 years old in Manchester when the McMillans set up their 'baby camp'.

Sir William Mather established a free Kindergarten in Salford in 1873, basing the practice in the nursery upon those of Friedrich Froebel (1785–1852), the originator of the term 'kindergarten' for the Play and Activity Institute he founded in 1837 at Bad Blankenburg in Germany. Mather founded the Manchester Kindergarten Association in 1873<sup>32</sup> and was a significant figure in the establishment of the English Froebel Society London in 1874, which continues to the present day as the National Froebel Foundation.<sup>33</sup> Froebellian pedagogy emphasised a child-centred approach and active learning with particular emphasis on outdoor play,<sup>34</sup> in many ways quite similar to the regime the McMillan sisters had cobbled together.

Grace Owen was a veteran of a long training process that emphasised pedagogy over the political and religious social justice impetus that had inspired the McMillan sisters. Owen was a half generation younger than the McMillans, trained in Froebelian methods at the Blackheath Kindergarten Training College. She had then gone on to achieve a degree in education at the University of Columbia in the United States, graduating in 1905. On her return to England, she joined the staff of the University of Manchester, lecturing in education.<sup>35</sup>

During the early decades of the 20th century, it was unusual for women to be graduates of a university at all, let alone to be given the chance to acquire the international sophistication that Owen brought to her practice. She became principal of the Manchester Kindergarten Training College, recognised in 1917 by the Board of Education as an endorsed supplier of teacher training, several years prior to the Rachel McMillan Nursery's recognition as a training centre. Owen became the Organising Secretary of the Manchester and Salford Council for Day Nurseries and Nursery Schools,<sup>36</sup> and in 1920, she created a 'demonstration nursery school' at 61 Shakespeare Street, Manchester.<sup>37</sup>

To paint a picture of the meeting between these two women for a modern audience, it may be helpful to envision McMillan in the role of a media star, who could provide the new association with punchy publicity via her passionate and politicised speeches, which could always be relied upon to 'wow' an audience. Owen, by contrast, was the consummate professional who had steadfastly carved out a path for herself in a world where it was very rare for women to rise to the academic and professional level that she had attained.

In this sense then, McMillan was the 'heart' of the NSA, well equipped to blaze a trail for social justice, while Owen was the 'head', who could use her depth of pedagogical knowledge and experience to create a profession that would take its place beside school teaching in an era becoming increasingly receptive to the concept of a public responsibility for the health and education of children.<sup>38</sup>

It was certainly a promising plan. But it didn't work out as expected.

## **THE VOICE OF THE NEXT GENERATION: ABIGAIL ADAMS ELIOT**

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In June 1921, Radcliffe College graduate Abigail Eliot, the 29-year-old daughter of a wealthy American family landed in England to spend six months at the McMillan nursery studying its practice, with the intention of setting up a similar nursery in Boston. Eliot had five years' experience of social work in the Boston area, followed by a year studying at Oxford University in England from 1919 to 1920. She was funded by the Boston Women's Education Association

and supervised by Mrs Henry Greenleaf Pearson, the wife of a wealthy Massachusetts Institute of Technology lecturer and author.<sup>39</sup>

When Eliot returned to Boston, she achieved her ambition to create and lead a successful nursery school, concluding her working life as the director of the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.<sup>40</sup> But before her independent professional practice began, however, the situation in which she was placed gave her the opportunity to document the differences between McMillan and Owen for posterity, in the letters that she sent back to Boston.

Initially, Eliot described her disappointment with the environment in which she was placed:

**8th June 1921:** I am established in one of the hostels of the school in a tiny room of the third floor of a building overlooking the school, which is a large garden here in the midst of a most sordid district.<sup>41</sup>

It was soon evident that she had some practice differences with Margaret McMillan, in particular that the practice in the nursery was not classically Froebelian:

**14th June 1921:** Under Miss McMillan there is a Principal or Headmistress of the school, Miss Stevinson. It seems that her educational ideas don't agree in toto with Miss McMillan. She is Froebel trained and leans in that direction.<sup>42</sup>

After a month had elapsed, she wrote more frankly to Mrs Pearson about some significant concerns, particularly her experience of Margaret McMillan as an extremely difficult supervisor:

**20th July 1921:** There are things here that make me angry and things that make me sad... Miss McMillan is so jealous of Mme Montessori's work that none of the Montessori apparatus can be used here... Miss McMillan is... so sure her ways are the only right ways that she will not even discuss such questions with people... it almost seems as if she lacks the scientific spirit.<sup>43</sup>

Eliot had some time off in August and immediately rekindled connections with friends she had made at Oxford, in order to find some respite in an environment she found more to her taste.

**3rd August 1921:** This week I am giving myself the luxury of living in... Bloomsbury. I couldn't stand Deptford any longer... I am glad of a week in comfortable quarters with good food... and a comfortable bed... fresh air and use of a nice bathroom and pleasant people to talk to.<sup>44</sup>

A fortnight later, she wrote to her mother from Bradford, where she was visiting some of the schools operating along the same practice lines as the McMillan nursery:

**16th August 1921:** The longer I am here, the more I discover that we [referring to those who embrace McMillan practices in general] scarcely speak the same language.... [Bradford] is supposed to be the most admired in education. Yet all I can think to describe it is sordid, dark, dingy and ugly.<sup>45</sup>



Less than a fortnight later, however, she sent another, more cheerful letter, having made the acquaintance of someone she found much more in tune with her own ideas about Early Years education:

**25th August 1921:** I had the pleasure of going to a tiny village on the edge of the North York Moors... to see Miss Grace Owen.<sup>46</sup>

She elaborated on her greater regard for Owen to Mrs Pearson:

**21st August 1921:** [Owen] told me so many things of most intense value that I... wish I had a Dictaphone with me... it seems as if she was heaven sent to put me on the right track... the greatest joy of all is her scientific spirit.<sup>47</sup>

When Eliot returned to London, she tried to tell McMillan about her discussions with Owen, which clearly did not go well. McMillan had previously expressed extreme displeasure when she learned that Eliot had arranged a visit to a nursery class in a Manchester elementary school 'on the ground I would learn nothing from it. Because of Miss McMillan's disapproval I took only one working day off, but I went... it was an important part of my English education in regard to nursery schools.'<sup>48</sup>

She reported McMillan's comments to Mrs Pearson:

**26th August 1921:** I am sick at heart today and must blow it out on someone. You seem to be the logical person to whom to do so... Miss McMillan was... scornful. She says she cannot get along with Miss Owen [and] doesn't like her... [McMillan] is an old woman and a pig-headed one.<sup>49</sup>

A week later, Eliot formally requested a transfer to Owen's school. Mrs Pearson's reply is unfortunately not in the record, but it seems the request was not granted, as Eliot remained at the Deptford Nursery for the remainder of her placement.<sup>50</sup> In 1960, she wrote vividly on her memories of Margaret McMillan as a professional mentor: 'Such sincerity, self-confidence and commitment... "treat each child as if he were your own"... a commanding manner and voice, she could frighten and dismay a young student.'<sup>51</sup>

While Eliot's accounts cannot be considered wholly objective, they are useful in shedding some light on the differences that created the heated debates that arose between McMillan and Owen when they were tasked to work closely together on the NSA. Eliot provides a clear account of the contrast between Owen's academic and professional ethos and McMillan's emotional, spiritually driven conviction, from which disagreements were destined to arise.

## THE NURSERY SCHOOL ASSOCIATION: BORN INTO CONTROVERSY

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Candidate suitability for nursery teacher training became an immediate bone of contention between McMillan and Owen. In Britain, the Frobellian tradition in which Owen had been schooled gave rise to a teacher training process which prepared students to teach three to six-year-olds via indoor, free-flow play-based learning with an adjacent outdoor area, similar to current conventions. Provision was frequently located in 'Nursery Classes' in primary schools

led by a trained nursery teacher, children were allocated to classes of approximately 30–35, and attended for a similarly structured school day to that offered to older children.

McMillan's practice had, by contrast, grown up around outdoor provision for disadvantaged children, where they spent most of the day playing in the open air, and in the shelters attached to the front of the buildings. The cohorts were much bigger than those in the typical nursery class, but staff were far more numerous; however a significant percentage of these were unqualified 'helpers.' Pupils attended for significantly longer hours, typically between 8 a.m. and 5.30 p.m., and the McMillan Nursery routinely admitted children who were not yet three.

McMillan insisted that children should spend most of their waking day at nursery and that the nursery should be responsible for providing all their main meals, plus the necessary social and emotional foundation for robust mental health. In 1925, she emphatically defended these principles, proposing that 'the nursery *class* [was] an extravagant investment failing to provide a good return',<sup>52</sup> insisting that the children in her nursery required more 'nurture' than they would get from attending a nursery class. She wrote privately to fellow Christian socialist Robert Blatchford in 1929:

Now I am battling for a nine-hour day for nursery school children. We open at a quarter to eight. We close at five thirty. It is not much use to little ones to rattle them in and out of school as they do. They need nurture.<sup>53</sup>... we must have a new conception of school that it should be a nurture centre as well as a place for lessons...<sup>54</sup>

When it came to the type and number of practitioners required, McMillan had a very different view to Grace Owen. She commented:

After sad experience we gave up nurses and turned to teachers. Then came new revelations... those who came first were shocked; they had never seen the inside of a slum home...<sup>55</sup>

McMillan insisted her students live in a building close by the nursery so they got 'to know their new neighbours. They have to get some idea of housing, of the cost of food, and the needs of a family who live always on the brink of a financial precipice!'<sup>56</sup> This, of course was the practice that had so horrified Abigail Eliot, vividly outlined in her letters.

In a NSA meeting held on 3rd January 1925, H. Ward, a member of the Board of Education, clearly outlined a point of view in line with that of Owen:

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 this 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.<sup>57</sup>

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

...All the members [of the NSA] 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.<sup>58</sup>

However, she was not successful in making any impression upon Grace Owen. As the secretary of the NSA, Owen was responsible for its communications, and in 1925 its statement of policy clearly stipulated one trained teacher to 35 children.<sup>59</sup> McMillan struck back in a bulletin from the NSA circulated in 1927, reiterating the pattern of practice and staffing in her nursery, referring to ‘new method of staffing and building.’ She explained that 150 children could be supervised by only ‘one trained teacher per shelter’ as long as there were plenty of untrained helpers.<sup>60</sup>

An NSA Bulletin produced in 1936 contains a 1930 quote from Grace Owen proposing that ‘the nursery class should.... function as a small nursery.’ An additional note in her handwriting clearly reiterates the formula of 1 teacher plus two helpers to 35 children which was present in the NSA policy document of 1925.<sup>61</sup>

Correspondence between Manchester-based Shena D. Simon and Grace Owen in early 1929 indicates the depth of the disagreement between Owen and McMillan. Simon comments that she is ‘very interested’ in the NSA but wants to know whether ‘it will be made quite clear that “nursery school” includes “nursery class;’ continuing:

Some people associated with the nursery school movement are definitely hostile to them [nursery classes]... I should not like to be helping an operation that would be in any way hostile to properly constituted nursery classes.<sup>62</sup>

Owen replied to the following day:

I think I understand your question perfectly... the president of our association is openly hostile to nursery classes... the NSA is however as stated in its constitution... pledged to work for the effective working of nursery school classes in the Education Act of 1918... I heartily endorsed the nursery school policy of the Manchester Education Committee of a few years ago... [which was] nursery school departments in new schools.<sup>63</sup>

The dichotomy between Owen’s concept of a nursery *education* and McMillan’s concept of *nurture* within an early years environment thus clearly emerges from these historical debates. McMillan’s emphasis was upon social and emotional nurture, which could be supplied by untrained workers, providing that they were sufficiently ‘motherly’, under the direction of a highly trained teacher. However, for Owen, the pedagogy delivered by trained teaching staff was the nursery’s central purpose. This fundamental disagreement went on to become a significant sticking point, obstructing the construction of a cohesive NSA policy for practice.

While there are inevitably gaps in the record relating to this growing schism, it is clear that on 16th April 1929, McMillan formally wrote to Owen, communicating her intention to resign from the presidency of the NSA.<sup>64</sup> On 7th May, the NSA responded, asking for further information on the reasons relating to this decision.<sup>65</sup> There is no concrete evidence to indicate this was ever provided. On 18th May McMillan submitted her letter of resignation.<sup>66</sup> She wrote to fellow founder NSA member Lillian de Lissa on 8th May warning of her resignation intentions, whilst reassuring de Lissa of her admiration for Owen, stating that there must be no bad feeling within

the NSA.<sup>67</sup> On 18th May, the same day as her resignation, McMillan wrote to de Lissa again, informing her that it had been 'quite a trial resigning from the presidentship [sic]'.<sup>68</sup> On 20th June, the NSA discussed McMillan's resignation and agreed to temporarily replace her with de Lissa,<sup>69</sup> and on 21st June, McMillan wrote to Owen that the NSA episode had left her with 'a sense of failure and regret'.<sup>70</sup>

McMillan's position was further discussed in the notes of the NSA on 20th June:

...Miss McMillan stated that her resignation was 'the result of a growing recognition that I am not in your movement. The salvation of the children of the poorest class will not come through the school that is advocated by the NSA'... [she proposed that] the statement of the principles of the NSA [published in 1925] was never properly discussed by the members.<sup>71</sup>

...thus implying that Owen had acted without consultation, an accusation not supported by the other officials on the Committee.<sup>72</sup>

In March 1930, McMillan wrote to Grace Owen to decline an invitation to write a chapter on outdoor nursery accommodation in a book that Owen was editing on the behalf of the NSA:

I would do anything to help the open air nursery school movement, but in obscuring my sister's and my own [sic] you are really hindering it.... If I wrote in your book I should be perhaps in conflict with other writers... I will not be in conflict at all.... I have learned my lesson and will not ally myself again.<sup>73</sup>

McMillan died a year later, in March 1931. Her posthumous fame swiftly began to eclipse that of the other founder members of the NSA; Jane Read comments that McMillan was 'designated a "prophetess" by LCC Inspectors Philip Ballard, Gwendolen Sanson and Miss E. Stevinson' in evidence to the Hadow Committee of 1933.<sup>74</sup> However, Owen's 'nursery class' strategy endured, dominating the culture of British early years education to the present day.<sup>75</sup>

It is quite possible that McMillan was too hasty to take offence and remove herself from the NSA. The woman that Eliot so vividly describes in her letters depicts a peppery character, with a tendency to take extreme and dramatic positions, particularly when she felt she had been 'crossed'. Approached differently, might Owen have been prepared to negotiate? Within the 1936 bulletin in which she reiterates her formula for nursery organisation, she additionally makes the point that the organisation of nurseries must recognise 'the type of accommodation provided [and]... must necessarily vary with the local circumstances'.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps if McMillan had been more inclined to compromise, a more complex concept of Early Years care and education practices that could draw on different practices in different situations a more flexible vision of Early Years education and care would have been bequeathed to later generations.

## **HISTORICAL THEORY INTO MODERN PRACTICE: MCMILLAN AND OWEN UNITED?**

The national importance of state-funded nursery education rose during the Second World War years of 1939–1945, and declined over the following five decades before moving back onto the New Labour government agenda in the National Childcare Strategy of 1998 'in the context of workfarism [and]... lucrative childcare markets'.<sup>77</sup>

This raised the ghosts of Owen and McMillan with respect to a potential clash of agendas, but one that was framed in the context of a very different society; the ravages of family poverty endured in Britain, most prevalently within inner city areas, as had been the case in McMillan's time. But there was also a growing demand for a 'school readiness' curriculum in from aspirational middle-class families who had grown up within an established Welfare State. The initial iteration of the Early Years Foundation Stage (2007)<sup>78</sup> was intended to address both agendas, with the Children's Centre initiative intended to coordinate support for families in need; and in the short period that they were able to operate, Prime Minister Gordon Brown commended them for making a 'real and genuine difference'<sup>79</sup> children and their families.

In 2010, a Conservative-led Coalition Government closed the vast majority of children's centres<sup>80</sup> citing an austerity agenda in response to the world financial crisis of 2007–2008.<sup>81</sup> In 2020, a Conservative Government commissioned a major review of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The resulting iteration drew accusations from the Early Years sector that it was 'too narrow and too formal for young children',<sup>82</sup> a debate which continues at time of publication.

So, how might Owen and McMillan respond to this situation? Perhaps they may have found themselves more united than they had been in their own time, joining forces to preserve the play-based learning that both passionately espoused. While it is clear that they viewed the terrain of nursery education from somewhat different positions, the current relentless top-down focus on children's 'readiness' for each successive stage of education and 'performance' in frequent narrowly framed assessment tasks would be alien to both. Again, there may have been differences in emphases. The McMillans would have been most likely to take up the mantle for the restoration of children's centres, while Owen would have been most likely to engage in the curriculum debate.

Grace Owen states in her 1920 book *Nursery School Education*:

The fostering of the creative impulses means the fostering of life itself... It is the great responsibility of the Nursery School to provide [the child] with the means and opportunity to express fully his own ideas and feelings... Careless gaiety and bubbling fun are true evidence of the untrammelled spirit, and where these are usually absent there is something wrong... some pressure from the grown-up helpers that needs to be removed, or some lack of unselfish sympathy.<sup>83</sup>

When asked about her philosophy of nursery education in BBC radio broadcast of 1923, Margaret McMillan said:

You may ask, why should we give all this to the children? Because this is nurture, and without it they can never really have education... the educational system should grow out of the nursery schools system, not out of a neglected infancy... [in the nursery school] everything is planned for life... If Great Britain will go forward [with open air nursery schools]... she will sweep away the cause of untold suffering, ignorance, waste and failure.<sup>84</sup>

These Grande Dames who engaged in pitched battle over the shaping of British Early Years education and care a century ago still have so much wisdom to offer policy makers today, if only they would listen.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- I have suggested above that the ideas and practice of the pioneers of modern Early Years education and care are still relevant today. Can you relate this to your own practice, and if so, how?
- Why do you think Eliot came down so firmly on Owen's 'side'? Do you agree with her? Or do you find her descriptions and judgements of McMillan unsympathetic?
- Would you be able to adopt the practice and ethos that McMillan and Owen pioneered into your practice? If not, how would you define the barriers? How could they be removed?
- Do you think that there are some practices advocated by McMillan and Owen that are not relevant or useful today, and if so, why?

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