

## **TACTYC Annual Conference**

**Friday 1st November – Saturday 2nd November, 2013**

### **Margaret McMillan's Ideals for Early Years Teacher Education: The Impact on Contemporary ITE Teacher Development** by Dr Betty Liebovich

This research explores the programme offered in the Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College for educating future teachers of young children in the early 20th century and the purpose and intent of the curriculum. By keeping in mind the goals for those future teachers and the focus for offering young children a high quality learning experience, we can critically analyse our contemporary attitudes and approaches to educating young children. In order to get a sense of how and whether the RMTTC upheld the ethos of Margaret McMillan's original curriculum for the college, former students of RMTTC were interviewed about their experiences while on the teacher education course. These views were then juxtaposed against the experiences shared by students who have recently completed the PGCE programme at Goldsmiths University of London with a specialisation in early years education. Goldsmiths created a pilot programme offered to a select few of the early years PGCE programme students last year, involving a partnership with six outstanding nursery/children's centres to provide these select students with an enhanced teaching and learning experience that embraced many of McMillan's ideals for teacher education. Two of these students were also interviewed to gain insight into their experiences on this new facet of the PGCE programme.

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" (p. 4, *The Nursery School*, 1919). The Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College was founded to change these attitudes and teacher education. At the time, a two-year programme was typical for early years teacher education and McMillan was adamant that future early years teachers needed no less than a three year programme to be fully trained to teach young children. "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, 1989, p.183).

The Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College did not have a physical building in which to educate teachers until 8 May, 1930. Teacher training up until that point took place in the nursery. Training at the Deptford Centre was offered as early as 1914, though it was not recognised by the Board of Education until 1919, when grants for a one-year residency in Deptford (on top of students' two-year training in other colleges) were made available (McMillan, 1919, pp. 19-20). All applicants were interviewed by Margaret McMillan and their three years of education were carefully monitored by her. According to a former student "There was a strong spirit of dedication among students constantly reinforced by the example of Margaret McMillan. The daily living conditions were hard and somewhat bleak" (Edwards, H. (n.d.) pp.13-14).

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; 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 Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College Legacy**

Through interviews with graduates of the RMTTC and students who were recently educated in the Goldsmiths early years PGCE, participants reflected on their experiences and how they echoed the goals and vision Margaret McMillan had for her teacher training college. SM graduated from RMTTC in 1953; OP graduated from RMTTC in 1974; JM graduated from Goldsmiths in 2009; and FT finished her PGCE through the STEEP programme last year. All of them gave insight into how some of their experiences mirrored the ideals McMillan used to design her teacher education programme.

#### **Housing and Peer Bonding**

SM and OP both reminisced about living in the housing provided by RMTTC and how being segregated from the male population was strictly enforced. They both felt that they were encouraged to focus on their studies and support their peers in the

programme with their time highly structured and lectures scheduled throughout the day. In the case of SM, there were lectures on Saturday mornings and if any of the students wanted to leave the dormitory to socialise in the community, they were expected to sign out and had a very strict curfew. She also indicated that some of the lecturers in the college lived in the dorm. OP explained that the same housing was used as that SM experienced, and that there had been expansion both to housing and college in the late 1950s to accommodate the increasing cohorts of students. FT and JM both lived in private housing while attending their teacher education programmes and had no curfews imposed on them by the university, but they did have very rigorous programmes with lectures meeting every weekday they were not in their placements. All the participants felt that they had bonded with at least a few of their peers and, like the women who graduated forty to fifty years ago, built lifelong friendships with some of the people they met at college.

### Theory of Education

All four of the participants spoke of theory of education being prevalent in their teacher education programmes. The focus of the theory changed slightly over the years. For instance, most of what SM remembers about theory being taught related to Froebel and his ideals as well as those of Seguin. As the graduates from the RMTTC received a certificate in Froebelian education upon completion, it stands to reason that the emphasis would be on these two theorists. OP highlighted the emphasis on Piaget in her education with some investigation into Froebel as well. In the late 1960's and into the 1970's when OP was a student, Piaget was highly regarded and a typical theorist studied in teacher education. JM and FT both spoke of Vygotsky as one of the theorists studied and how their programme gave them an opportunity to investigate theory of education in-depth through a compulsory written assignment. Further, FT was required to write her assignment at Master's-level.

### Multiple Experiences

In relation to observing and understanding a variety of programmes, SM spoke of not only visiting other nurseries in greater London, but she also spent time in a home for children identified with specific physical and cognitive needs, caring for them and becoming a part of the daily support for the children. It was also compulsory for her to spend time in clinics designed to offer medical and dental services to children and families in need. OP described her experiences of observing state schools all over greater London, but was not required to spend time in a clinic or a children's home for her programme. JM spent time in a couple of learning environments, mostly in Southeast London. FT, as part of the STEEP (South Thames Early Education Partnership) programme, not only spent time in six outstanding nursery/children's centres, she also had time in a KS1 setting and observed a birth-to-three setting. All four participants were quite adamant that observations of and exposure to multiple settings enhanced their understanding of young children's learning and development

and would encourage more exposure to a variety of programmes for any student teacher. JM indicated that it is very difficult for a student teacher to understand the “hidden” curriculum that a nursery setting offers—how to support children whose families are in crisis, recognizing and reporting suspected child abuse and supporting families in crisis. These issues need to be experienced first-hand and are difficult if not impossible to teach in a university setting.

### **Contemporary Early Years ITE**

In 2010, the DfE released a schools White Paper, encouraging partnerships for Initial Teacher Education so that future teachers would have more experience in the learning setting and be immersed in the teaching community. The idea proposed that this approach “gives outstanding schools a leading role in the training and professional development of teachers, support staff and headteachers, as well as contributing to the raising of standards through school-to-school support” (<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/careers/traininganddevelopment/initial/b00205399/itt-partnerships/teaching-schools> ). Goldsmiths University of London has a PGCE programme that offers an early years specialism. In an attempt to create stronger relationship with six outstanding (as defined by Ofsted) nursery and children’s centres and provide interested early years specialist students with an immersion in an outstanding learning setting, we created a programme in consultation with the six outstanding early years centres entitled South Thames Early Education Partnership (STEEP).

This programme reflects some of the ideals that McMillan espoused in creating the Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College. Although the students are enrolled in a PGCE programme that runs for 38 weeks, as opposed to the three years that McMillan adamantly insisted was necessary for a well educated teacher of young children (McMillan, 1926), our STEEP students are immersed in an outstanding early years setting where they become a part of the learning community as a developing teacher. Throughout the STEEP programme, students have an opportunity to observe and be a part of the six programmes involved in the STEEP project, spend two weeks in a Reception classroom observing and teaching, four weeks in a KS1 classroom observing and teaching and observing a birth-to-three programme. Further, the STEEP programme offers students a grounding in theory of teaching through lectures and seminars at the university.

McMillan only opened her teacher training programme to females, partly because she felt that there were women who lived in poverty and had meagre paying jobs that could benefit from studying young children and developing skills that would lead to a career. In contemporary PGCE early years programmes, all applicants are considered and currently, our STEEP programme has three males enrolled. All applicants to the STEEP programme are interviewed by a member of the early years team at the university and at least one member of the partnership. Students are

asked to write a review of why they feel the STEEP programme would be a good match them and what they might bring to the programme. Much like McMillan, the STEEP programme seeks to recruit students who are committed to pursuing a career in early years education or at least use their early years knowledge to create change for children and their education, in some cases, in the KS1 and KS2 learning setting.

All students enrolled on the PGCE programme at Goldsmiths are expected to study and write at Masters level. Successful completion of two written assignments within the programme leads to students attaining 60 credits towards a Master's degree. This echoes McMillan's assertion that teachers of young children need high quality staff (McMillan, 1927) and "require a finer perception and wider training and outlook than is needed by any other kind of teacher" (McMillan 1919). Through the STEEP project, early years PGCE students at Goldsmiths are offered a unique opportunity to be immersed in early years education that emulates McMillan's ideals while meeting the standards required by the Teaching Agency in England.

### **Conclusion**

By investigating the Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College, we can gain an understanding of a well-developed, high standard programme that sought to educate future teachers of young children both in theory and practice. Critically analysing what transpired 100 years ago, we can gain a sense of the challenges and successes of an effective teacher training institution. This research has begun to address an urgent need to evaluate the education of contemporary teachers of young children. McMillan's goal for teachers of young children was for them to gain insight into the theoretical and practical aspects of young children's development and learning. The STEEP programme at Goldsmiths University of London has tried to emulate this approach in creating an enhanced teacher education programme that immerses future teachers in outstanding nurseries and children's centres. This research will continue to investigate the journals and writings of those women who studied with McMillan, who studied at RMTTC after McMillan's passing, and who have and are studying early years PGCE at Goldsmiths through the STEEP project.

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