

# Abigail Eliot and Margaret McMillan

## Bringing the Nursery School to the United States

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Prior to the nursery school movement, Dr. Arnold Gesell described the American education system in 1924 this way: “The educational ladder of the American public school is a tall one and a stout one but it does not reach the ground. It does not have a solid footing” (11). The movement was designed to extend that ladder to the ground. In England, it began with Margaret and Rachel McMillan, sisters focusing first on health and hygiene and then on education. The nursery school movement in the United States began with the three fields of home economics, social work, and education in the early decades of the 20th century, in the wake of England’s experience. Early nursery training centers stressed good health and hygiene for children, parent education for better mothering, and children’s education and habit training through play. Abigail Eliot was one of the first women to create a nursery school for young children in the United States. She based it on her training and education with the British founder of the nursery school, Margaret McMillan.

### Margaret McMillan (1860–1931)

Rachel and Margaret McMillan were Christian Socialists active in British politics and in campaigning for better health and education for the underprivileged children of England’s working class. They were involved in creating health and dental clinics for those living in impoverished sections of London, campaigned for the 1906 Provision of

School Meals Act, and created night camps for needy children in Deptford in 1908. The camps, offering clean bedding and nutritious food, allowed children time away from their cramped tenements.

To draw on Gesell’s metaphor, the McMillan sisters wanted to “extend that ladder to the ground” for underserved children in London. In March 1914, their nursery opened its doors to the youngest children living in the tenements of Deptford. At the turn of the 20th century, as its industry declined, this area of London experienced extreme deprivation that included a shortage of clean, affordable housing and reasonably well-paid jobs (Bradburn 1989). Children lived in squalor, which led them to experience a plethora of health issues and a lack of appropriate social skills. The McMillan sisters were determined to address this dire situation.

### Abigail Adams Eliot (1892–1992)

Eliot began her career as a social worker with the Children’s Mission in Boston, Massachusetts. She soon became disillusioned with social work and studied economics at Oxford University during 1919–20. When she returned to Boston, Mrs. Henry Greenleaf Pearson, of The Women’s Education Association, invited her to study at the Rachel McMillan Nursery and Teacher Training Centre in Deptford, London. The six-month trip was in preparation for establishing the Ruggles Street Nursery School in Boston.

Abigail Eliot's first contact with Margaret McMillan was through McMillan's book *The Nursery School* (1919). In a reflection published in 1960 as a memorial to Margaret McMillan on the 100th anniversary of her birthday, Eliot wrote,

I read it [*The Nursery School*] on board a steamer while I was crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the spring of 1921. Only a few weeks before, Mrs. Henry Greenleaf Pearson had asked me whether I would like to start a nursery school in Boston. I had replied by asking, "What is a nursery school?" (Eliot 1960).

Thus began Eliot's journey into nursery school education.

## The nursery school

When Abigail arrived in Deptford, she was impressed that every person she met knew about the nursery school. In the streets, however, she watched very young children. They were dirty, their hair infested with lice. Impetigo ran rampant. As she approached the nursery school, she saw a high fence with an entrance gate. Inside was a large garden with low, open buildings (shelters) on each side. Eliot stated that "nursery schools as such could be said to have been born as a result of various health studies in England in 1908, 1909, and 1910. These studies showed that 80 percent of children were well at birth, but only 20 percent entered school in good health" (Hymes 1978, 9). According to Abigail, "Margaret McMillan knew education in England well, and her response to what she knew was to establish an open-air nursery school" (Hymes 1978, 9).

The educational issue at the time was not only that young children were experiencing health and educational challenges but also that the children were not being nurtured by women who understood child development socially, emotionally, or academically. McMillan invented the term *nursery school* so that children would be nurtured via a daily inspection, outdoor learning, play, and healthy, balanced nutrition. She wanted to establish a method for educating young

children that combined all these elements with well-trained teachers. That was why McMillan identified the nursery as a school—she envisioned an educational environment where adults learned to create safe, healthy, and enriching experiences for young children. McMillan was driven to help the student teachers "learn what young children could do, what help they needed, what attitude toward them brought best results, and what makes up a young child's day" (Eliot 1921). Eliot noted that McMillan had a definite vision for her program: "Margaret McMillan was clearly a personage . . . [who] knew what the nursery school should be and do and what was good for little children" (Eliot 1960).

In the 1920s, education was taken seriously only when grounded in scientific theory and ideals. McMillan based much of her educational ethos on the ideas of physician Edouard Seguin, social reformer Robert Owen, and pedagogue Friedrich Froebel. Once the English government sanctioned McMillan's nursery as a teaching school for adults as well as a nursery school for children, the student teachers earned a Froebelian teaching certificate. McMillan created a learning environment focused on the outdoors and natural materials. She provided the children with resources they could access and encouraged teachers to sit with the children and let them guide the adults about their interests. All the children's learning was child-directed and facilitated by adults. McMillan even created her own teaching materials, which were drawn from the garden—leaves, flowers, herbs, and such. The children's learning evolved from these materials through teachers' encouragement, using what we now call higher-order thinking questions and sustained shared thinking. Her invention was similar to Froebel's gifts and Montessori's apparatus, in that they were activities designed to engage children in understanding their world through creativity and insight.

McMillan's nursery was internationally recognized for its innovative approach to young children's learning. People from all over the world visited or, like Abigail Eliot, studied with McMillan. Although funding the nursery was always a challenge, a large network of influential people visited and contributed money to the children's

## Abigail Eliot's Influence on Contemporary Nursery School Practice

- Participated in the leadership that created the National Association for Nursery Education (1926), which became the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1964). Today, NAEYC, through its accreditation programs, publications, conferences, and advocacy, remains a strong organization dedicated to helping young children thrive.
- Recognized the need to offer four-year bachelor's degree programs to students preparing to work with young children and founded what has become the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study at Tufts University, whose graduates start or teach in nursery schools in the United States, Canada, and abroad.
- Founded a Nursery Training School at the Pacific Oaks College in California that has played a crucial role in the development of early childhood education in the United States since 1945.
- Advocated good health and hygiene for children, which continues to be a cornerstone of all early childhood practice.
- Embraced and disseminated a philosophy of encouraging children to play with materials as they chose, with an emphasis on imagination and creativity that continues to be a part of the developmentally appropriate practice that NAEYC supports in high-quality programs today.
- Opened parent education programs—research shows how integral family engagement is to children's learning, and high-quality programs see parents as partners in their children's education.
- Identified learning materials now common in early childhood programs, like colorful surroundings, natural light, boxes of wooden blocks, soft rugs, art on the walls, low shelves, and child-sized tables and chairs.

cause. One of them was Queen Mary. Eliot happened to be studying at the nursery when Queen Mary visited to dedicate a new shelter. Eliot describes the visit:

The new shelter and meadow extension of the school was opened by Queen Mary. The occasion is one of my special memories of my months in Deptford. Miss McMillan briefed us on how to

behave in the presence of the Queen: "Call her Madam if she speaks to you, and never turn your back to her." When the Queen came, she and we were crowded by a mass of children trying to see her. In the effort to help keep things under control, I was pushed by the children nearer and nearer to the Queen. A child very near her was wearing spectacles, and because I was the nearest adult, she asked me what the trouble was with his eyes. In Americanese I replied, "He is crossed-eyed, Madam." "Oh," she said, smiling, "a squint." Never, never shall I forget it. The whole occasion was memorable, and my own exchange with Queen Mary a happy incident to remember and relate. (Eliot 1960)

Eliot took her experiences and understanding back to Boston to offer young children living in poverty enriching experiences in a learning environment that reflected the ideals of the McMillan nursery.

## Ruggles Street Nursery

Abigail Eliot's experiences with McMillan prepared her for the challenge of revamping the Ruggles Street Nursery School and Training Center (RSN) in 1922. Upon Abigail's entering the nursery, the nurse in charge immediately walked out, leaving Eliot with 30 children ranging from a few weeks to 14 years old. Although the setting was spotlessly clean, it was boring and ill equipped. Drawing on her knowledge from the McMillan nursery, Eliot painted the space and found volunteers to help furnish the environment to make it more welcoming; this included adding rugs on the floor, pictures on the walls, and flowers on the tables. Eliot gathered educational equipment similar to that used in the McMillan nursery, like a set of McMillan educational apparatus, for the children to use independently.

While developing RSN, Eliot also continued her formal education, earning an MEd from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1926, followed by a doctorate in 1930 (one of the first women to do so). As the nursery school movement grew, Eliot was one of the leaders who created the National Association for Nursery Education—NANE—in 1926, which became the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in 1964. In 1933, she was

instrumental in advising the federal Works Progress Administration to create jobs for teachers and finance nursery schools for children of unemployed families.

In 1951, the RSN Training School became affiliated with Tufts University and moved to the campus in 1954. In 1955 its name was changed to the Eliot-Pearson School of Tufts University, whose graduates went on to start or teach in nursery schools in the United States, Canada, and other countries abroad. In 1952, Eliot retired as head of the school she founded and moved with her friend, Anna Holman, to Pasadena, California. There she established a Nursery Training School at the Pacific Oaks Friends School.

## Conclusion

Abigail Eliot, much like Margaret McMillan, strove to prove that an enriching education for young children requires highly trained teachers and a carefully organized learning environment. She spent her career designing and developing nursery education for children and families living in poverty. Eliot's fundamental belief in young children and their education can be summarized in a 1944 statement of fundamental principles, as listed in Martha H. Chapman's history of the Nursery Training School:

Children are persons; education should always be thought of as guidance which influences the development of persons; maturing and learning must go hand in hand in the process of development; it is important that personalities be well balanced."

In her twilight years, Eliot continued to work on behalf of young children and their families by serving a brief term (1952–1954) as Director of the Teacher Education Division at Pacific Oaks Friends School in Pasadena, California, and later teaching at Brooks School in Concord, Massachusetts. Abigail Eliot was a pioneer of the nursery education movement in the United States, and her legacy continues to impact contemporary early childhood practice.

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