

# Back to the Future: Contemporary Lessons From a Century of Learning at Arellian, Ireland's Oldest Nursery

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## Abstract

This article emerges from a SCoTENS-funded research project, *Contested Childhoods Across Borders and Boundaries* (2019-2021), jointly conducted by Maynooth University and Stranmillis University College. It focuses on the origins, distinctiveness, and enduring relevance of the Arellian Nursery, the first nursery school in Ireland (North or South), which first opened its doors in 1928. Drawing on original sources and historical records, the article charts the establishment of Arellian as a philanthropic, privately sponsored venture in south Belfast, founded, from the outset, to address educational and social disadvantage and to promote outdoor learning, healthy lifestyles, pupil agency, and home-school links. Influenced by pioneers such as Grace Owen and Margaret McMillan, themselves disciples of Froebel, play, as a means of learning and development, was considered of great importance. While the founders and early superintendents of Arellian might have been seen as progressive, anti-establishment outliers, our contemporary context highlights the prescience and enduring relevance of the vision of Arellian almost a hundred years later. Active outdoor learning, healthy lifestyles, agentic learning, and home-school-community partnerships are becoming increasingly mainstream tenets throughout the Northern Irish education system. It is argued that, as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, important lessons can be learned for educators and teacher educators from the example of Arellian, Ireland's very first nursery school.

**Keywords:** early years, agency, play, outdoor learning, social disadvantage

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Interest in the unique educational approach of Arellian, Ireland's oldest nursery, began through a SCoTENS seed-funding project culminating in a report entitled, *Contested childhoods across borders and boundaries: A north-south comparative study* (O'Toole et al., 2021a). This significant cross-border research collaboration involved the authors of this article (McClelland and Purdy) from Stranmillis University College and a multi-

disciplinary team from Maynooth University (O'Toole, Forde, O'Keefe, Säfström, and Walsh). In the course of that broader study of the representation of childhood in curricular documents, North and South, during the first decade following the partition of Ireland in 1921, the case of Arellian emerged as an important "outlier" for its time. There was a strong sense that this unique nursery merited further investigation, additional historical research, and perhaps, most importantly, a site visit to explore just how the legacy of Arellian's founders might live on almost a century after it first opened. Although the story of Arellian proved to be of great interest, the public health restrictions implemented during 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, restricted face-to-face meetings of the research team, prevented documentary research at the Public Records Office (PRONI) in Belfast, and hindered any opportunity for a site visit to Arellian. This has now been remedied and, in this article, we aim to provide brief historical context, describe the establishment of Arellian, outline its unique pedagogical approach, and highlight contemporary lessons from this pioneering nursery school, which is still thriving today in inner-city Belfast.

## Historical Context

Arellian was established in 1928 towards the end of a decade of political tension, schism, upheaval, and violence across the island of Ireland, which saw the creation of the new six-county jurisdiction of Northern Ireland (remaining part of the United Kingdom) in 1921, following the Government of Ireland Act the previous year. The first decade of Northern Ireland's educational history has been well documented elsewhere (see Akenson, 1973; Buckland, 1973; Farren, 1995; Purdy, 2022, for fuller accounts) and was characterised by the struggle for the consolidation of Protestant/Unionist power through administrative structures and programmes of instruction. The first Education Minister, Lord Londonderry, had set out to unify the already divided education sectors and, through "cooperation and sympathy", to create a "system which will be the admiration of all other countries" (Northern Ireland Senate Debates, 2021, v.1, col. 24). His efforts ultimately fell victim to the competing forces of the Protestant and Catholic churches, however, whose insistence on retaining administrative and religious control over their respective schools proved insurmountable. By the time of Lord Londonderry's resignation in 1926, the notion of creating a unified education system under state control had been abandoned, and the groundwork had been laid for a century of educational division in a largely bipartite system that persists to this day.

In terms of curricular approaches in Northern Ireland, O'Toole et al. (2021b) document the process of establishing the Departmental Committee on the Educational Services in Northern Ireland, known as the Lynn Committee, (ultimately without Catholic representation) to plan out the structures and curricular approach to be adopted in the new Northern Irish education system. It is noteworthy that, while the education

system in the South turned *inward* and strove to consolidate a sense of Irish/Gaelic identity, culture, and language through its new curriculum, Northern Ireland's education system looked *eastward* towards the rest of the United Kingdom and ultimately the British Empire. The *Final report of the departmental committee on the educational services in Northern Ireland* (Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland, 1923) included, for instance, a section entitled, "Loyalty", in which it is stated that, in all state-funded schools, "the children shall be trained in habits of loyalty to the Constitution of Northern Ireland and to the British Empire" (p. 208). Books to be used in classrooms would require approval from the Ministry of Education, and the Irish language was downgraded to the status of any other "foreign" European language. The approach was also highly gendered, with boys (only) to be taught "woodwork" and girls (only) to be taught practical subjects, such as "cookery", "laundry work", and "household management". With some ironic similarities to the education system of the new Republic of Ireland, the approach was highly traditional, didactic, teacher-led and gendered, as the educational leaders of both jurisdictions sought to create loyal and obedient citizens and to protect against any form of dissension. Importantly for this discussion, there was no consideration given to the provision of state-funded nursery education in Northern Ireland or in the Republic of Ireland. Thus, the provision of care and education to children of preschool age was left to be provided for privately, generally by individuals or groups with philanthropic intentions.

## Arellian: Origins, Influences, and Pedagogy

In a working-class area of Belfast, a different kind of history was being made almost a century ago in the fledgling state of Northern Ireland. A few years after partition, and with society reeling from the after-effects of the Great War, some past pupils of Richmond Lodge Girls' School ("R. L.", therefore "R. L.-ian" - "Arellian") had a desire to help working mothers and their children living in local areas of deprivation. Two of the past pupils, A. F. Purvis and K. McCormick, decided that the most effective way to channel their philanthropic intentions would be to establish a nursery school to meet the needs of working-class families in an inner-city district (McNeill, 1949).

The members of the Arellian Association were keen to set the project in motion. A native of Northern Ireland working in England and a Froebel-trained teacher, Dorothy Coates (née Moore), offered to take the first post, as superintendent, while the Arellians committed to covering expenses for the first three years of the venture (McNeill, 1949). The Arellians were influenced by pioneers across the Irish Sea, notably Margaret McMillan and Grace Owen,<sup>1</sup> the first President and Secretary of the Nursery School Association formed in the UK in 1923 (Jarvis & Liebovich, 2015). Margaret McMillan

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret McMillan (1860–1931) came from a Christian Socialist background and was influenced by Froebel. Grace Owen (1873–1965), whose thinking was also shaped by Froebel, came from an academic and pedagogical background. A graduate of the University of Columbia (1905) and later principal of Manchester Kindergarten Training College and Secretary of Manchester and Salford Council for Day Nurseries, she opened a "demonstration nursery" in Manchester in 1920.

and her sister Rachel, both influenced by Froebel,<sup>2</sup> had opened the first open-air nursery in Deptford, England in 1913, known as “the school in the garden” (Ailwood, 2007). The Arellians visited Deptford alongside other nurseries in London and were impressed with the work going on: “We were thrilled with what we saw. The sight of healthy, happily employed little children... and the unbounded enthusiasm of all the workers” (McNeill, 1949, p. 1). In preparation for her role as superintendent, Dorothy Moore also volunteered for six weeks in Somerstown Nursery in London, while the Arellians oversaw the practical arrangements such as child-sized wash stands, toys, and other resources for the opening of the nursery in Elmwood Presbyterian Church Hall, which was kindly granted rent free (McNeill, 1949).

It was on November 5, 1928, “a dreary enough Monday morning” (McNeill, 1949, p. 6), that Arellian Nursery School first opened its doors to three little girls. Arellian has been serving all children in the locality ever since, with no barriers drawn in terms of gender or community background.<sup>3</sup> The aims of the nursery, drawn from a book by Grace Owen (1921/2018), were published in each annual report of Arellian Nursery School:

1. to provide healthy external conditions for the children – light, sunshine, space and fresh air
  2. to ensure a healthy, happy, regular life for the children, as well as continuous medical supervision
  3. to assist each child to form for himself [sic] wholesome habits
  4. to give opportunity for the exercise of the imagination and the development of many interests as well as skills of various kinds
  5. to give experience of community life on a small scale where children of similar as well as, varying ages work and play with one another day by day
  6. to achieve a real unity with the life of the home
- (Annual report of the Arellian nursery school, 1929–30, p. 2).

These aims highlighted the importance of providing happy, healthy, outdoor conditions for children, ensuring that medical attention was available, and supporting the young learners to develop agency and imaginative skills. Finally, the importance of experiencing community life and of forging links with a child’s home life was made very clear (McNeill, 1930). In adhering to these aims, regular medical supervision was provided by Nurse Strain, who volunteered her services, as did local doctors and the dentist from the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. Local volunteers also ensured

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2 Friedrich Froebel (1782–852) was a German educationalist who pioneered the kindergarten and rejected the teacher-led education of his day, instead advocating curious, creative, and autonomous play nurtured by a supportive adult.

3 As Arellian was located in a largely Protestant working-class area, it is likely that most children who attended were from this demographic, although there is no evidence in the archive to confirm the religious background of attendees. Nonetheless, Arellian provided, at the very least, a potential space for nursery education without sectarian division.

that the children attending the nursery school were well-fed with good food and could spend an abundance of time outdoors. The school was open from 9 am to 6 pm every weekday and, to create a vital link with parents, a monthly mothers' meeting was set up, which was very well received. Soon, the community became aware of the Arellian project, and numbers began to grow. As Molly McNeill, secretary to the Arellian Nursery School committee, claimed in the first annual report, "...the nursery school has won a real place in the life of the district" (McNeill, 1930, p. 6). Acutely cognisant of the needs within the community it served, Arellian Nursery levied a small charge of 2s 6d<sup>4</sup> per week, much lower than the 6s childminding rate of the time. Not willing to turn away any child due to poverty, it also had a Relief Fund for supplementing and supporting parents who found it difficult to cover these costs (McNeill, 1930).

After outgrowing their first premises, members of the Arellian Association searched for land and, with permission from the Belfast Corporation, purchased one-and-a-half acres (formerly the site of a graveyard for the victims of tuberculosis). The site was at the end of Utility Street and Bentham Drive, in an inner-city working-class district of Belfast. For the sum of £600 in 1931, they entered history as having built their own open-air nursery school, the first of its kind on the island of Ireland (McNeill, 1949). With great excitement, the official opening took place in May of that year with Grace Owen as guest of honour. Molly McNeill, honorary secretary to the committee, commented in her speech at the opening of the school:

*The site itself is wonderful, we are right in the midst of our district, and yet have a lovely view of the mountains and glorious fresh air. It would be hard indeed to find a more admirable situation for a nursery school...* (McNeill, 1931, p. 1).

Everything about Arellian had the child at the centre. As detailed in its annual reports, the Arellian Nursery School claimed to provide:

*A healthy diet of good wholesome food eaten in the company of adults and friends; plenty of exercise and fresh air in the school 'field' and garden and in the nearby park; regular medical and dental checks - the nurse attended the school daily, the doctor weekly; opportunities to wash, to play freely and to engage in useful and purposeful activities, many of a domestic nature which could be related to home....* (McCavera, 1988, p. 3).

The aims and provision of a multitude of independent play activities, unlike the traditional education system of the day, clearly anticipated the idea of the *agentic child* as described in Sorin and Galloway's "constructs of childhood" (Sorin & Galloway, 2006). Notably, too, and in contrast to elementary curricula of the day, all children in the Arellian Nursery School had the freedom to engage in all activities, without demarcation by gender. The comments of Dorothy Moore, the nursery

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4 Two shillings and six pence (2s and 6d) was equivalent to a half crown in old British currency. Until 1971, British currency was in pounds, shillings, and pence. One pound was equivalent to 20 shillings, one shilling to 12 pence, and one penny to two half pennies. In the early 1930s, the average weekly wage for a man was £1, 11s and 6d, with women earning significantly lower rates of pay (Holloway, 2017).

superintendent, point towards the equitable curricular opportunities afforded to pupils. She noted that, through the programme of varied learning activities, the child at Arellian "...will have the freedom and the possibilities for playing and developing through his play at his [sic] own rate, which is every child's right" (Moore, 1930, p. 4). Outdoor, playful learning was considered vitally important. In an effort to facilitate such play, the children were provided with an outdoor "jungle gym", sand pit, and pond for water play, with children spending a majority of their time outside in the fresh air (McNeill, 1949, p. 6).

By 1938, Arellian had a further extension, plans for which were drawn up by the architect of the Belfast Education Committee. A medical room, enlarged kitchen, laundry, and extendable doors onto an outdoor veranda meant that the nursery could accommodate a further 38 children from its waiting list. The extension cost £2,288, and was opened by the Duchess of Abercorn. She was accompanied by another notable figure in the world of early years' education, Dr Susan Isaacs,<sup>5</sup> on her one and only visit to Belfast, "[who]...filled us with fresh enthusiasm and showed us also the need for knowledge in the care of young children" (McNeill, 1949, p. 11).

Arellian led the way for many other nursery schools in Northern Ireland and, after much persuasion, in December 1936 the Ministry of Education agreed to fund the salary of a superintendent in nursery schools with attendance of forty or more children. The following January (1937), to further support nursery education, the Belfast Education Committee agreed to take responsibility for two thirds of capital expenditure, with nursery education officially receiving the "green light" nine years later in 1946 (McCavera, 1988). By 1949, six nurseries had been established, with a further 24 being built in the following two decades up to 1970, and prevalence increasing substantially between then and the present day. Just after Arellian's 21st birthday in 1949, committee members (some of whose descendants remain connected to the nursery school today) handed over management of the nursery to the Belfast Education Authority (McNeill, 1949), and so, although still supported by the Arellian Association, Arellian became a government-funded nursery school from that point on.

## Contemporary Lessons

As the world realigns to meet the needs of children and young people in the aftermath of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of contemporary priorities resonate closely with the early example of Arellian. These will be outlined below.

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Isaacs (1886–1948), atheist, socialist, and member of the Fabian Society, has been described as the most influential English-born child psychologist of her time. As Head of the Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education in London, she pioneered observational studies of children in the 1920s and authored prolific textbooks on teacher training between the 1930s and 1960s. Her work, in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, was considered ground breaking (see Graham, 2023).

## Redirecting the Focus to Early Years

Firstly, a current focus on the importance of early years echoes the thinking of Arellian's founders. The Arellian Association recognised the importance of impacting the lives of society's youngest learners by providing for their physical, emotional, familial, and learning needs. In Northern Ireland, this need has been reiterated in a recent report entitled, *A fair start*, with an action plan to address educational underachievement (Purdy, Logue et al., 2021). It was published by an Expert Panel established as one of the commitments made by the Northern Ireland Executive in the New Decade, New Approach political settlement of January 2020 (Smith & Coveney, 2020). Launched on June 1, 2021, *A fair start* sets out a total of 47 costed actions across eight key areas, the first and most substantial of which is entitled, "Redirecting the Focus to Early Years" (containing 13 of the 47 actions). In the report, the Expert Panel refer to the importance of the Heckman Curve (Heckman Equation, 2013), highlighting the long-term value of investing in early years as a means of offsetting later expenditure, and affirm that:

*Ensuring all children get a fair start, will lead to more equitable outcomes for all children, families and communities. The benefits of effective early intervention will be in terms of physical and mental wellbeing, educational attainment and longer term employment prospects (Purdy, Logue et al., 2021, p. 1).*

The report highlighted the importance of early childhood education and care, and underlined the need for collaboration across sectors, with a particular focus on involving health professionals and working to partner with parents and families from disadvantaged communities. It is clear that the founders of Arellian in the late 1920s and early 1930s already recognised the value of collaboration between education and health in early years' provision, an approach that policymakers are still at pains to promote almost a century later.



## **Playful and outdoor learning**

There are deep historical roots to the view of play as crucial for children's development. Walsh has written that:

*From as early as the eighteenth century, play has been deemed as highly serious and of deep significance for children. It has been promoted as the medium through which young children learn best and through which the whole child is fully developed (Walsh, 2017, p. 9).*

Within the context of Northern Ireland, we see the prioritisation of play in Arellian as prescient of the contemporary re-evaluation of the role of play in the early years. The importance of this has become even more accentuated in the aftermath of two extended periods of lockdown and home schooling in 2020 and 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Purdy, Harris et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2020). As these lengthy lockdowns resulted in a lack of social interaction, cognitive stimulation, and language exposure alongside other children and adults, with negative consequences (McMullen, 2021), play has been promoted as more important than ever in this post COVID-19 recovery period. When schools reopened, many teachers demonstrated creativity around providing playful opportunities for children, mostly outdoors, where the threat of infection was deemed to be lower. The success of this focus on outdoor play has subsequently led teachers to re-evaluate and perpetuate this as an invaluable part of early years' educational practice (Walsh et al., 2020). With obvious benefits for young learners, it has been shown to prepare all learners more effectively for formal schooling, regardless of background (Hunter & Walsh, 2014, as cited in Henderson et al., 2020, p. 12; McGuinness et al., 2014). Outdoor learning as a pedagogy has also built momentum and increased in popularity over recent years, with the Northern Ireland Forest School Association forming in 2008 and many schools acquiring Forest School status thereafter. Learning outside the classroom can have additional benefits for the youngest learners in the form of improved communication, concentration, social skills, stamina, and the development of fine and gross motor skills (O'Brien & Murray, 2007). Other research has found that outdoor learning improves children's self-regulation, develops their higher cognitive skills, supports creativity and resilience, and boosts academic achievement (Atchley et al., 2012). As referenced above, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that, for many, outside spaces were safest, which prompted a further surge of interest in this field. Once again, we see how the inspirational leaders of Arellian almost a century ago were ahead of their time in their pedagogical practice.

## **Parental and Community Partnership**

Parental involvement in children's learning has long been associated with success (Clark, 2007). Right from the outset, Arellian involved parents and set up a regular meeting for parents (mothers) to ensure a vital link between a child's home life and



school. The founders of Arellian understood from the outset the importance of home and school working in partnership to make a difference. For instance, in her second annual secretary's report, Molly McNeill affirmed, "we realise more and more that help for and from the mothers is vital to the success of the school" (McNeill, 1932, p. 4).

The COVID-19 pandemic, and enforced homeschooling for almost all children, created an unprecedented opportunity for parental involvement in children's learning. Two recent surveys of the home-schooling experiences of parents and carers in Northern Ireland during the first and second extended periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021 (Purdy, Harris et al., 2021; Walsh et al., 2020) highlighted a number of important issues. Notably, these included the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on socially disadvantaged families, the differentiated levels of parents' confidence and competence in supporting children's learning based on social and educational background, and the burden on mothers, in particular, of attending to their children's learning in the home. Once again, the pioneering spirit of Arellian, in establishing regular meetings with parents (especially mothers), was significant in its acknowledgment of the importance of home-school partnership, the value of place-based approaches to addressing underachievement, and the fostering of a strong home-learning environment, all of which is reflected in *A Fair start*, whose authors note:

*A substantial body of research has indicated that parenting and children's activities in the early years have a strong influence on cognitive development, and that features of an effective home-learning environment such as reading to children, using complex language, warmth in interactions and responsiveness are all associated with better developmental outcomes (Purdy, Logue et al., 2021, p. 38).*

## Arellian Today

On a recent visit to Arellian Nursery, which is still housed within its original 1930s buildings, it was evident that it was not only the building that had stood the test of time. A vibrant oasis of playful and outdoor learning, with support for children and their families, was clear to see. The principal, Jenny Pogue, spoke about the kindness of the Arellian Association to her as a young principal and about how, 25 years later, many of the Association's members, now in their 70s and 80s, retain an unwavering interest in the school. For instance, the principal reported that recently the staff had noted a need for children to develop gross motor skills due to limited play areas around their home settings. The response of the Arellian Association had been to provide a beautiful outdoor playground specifically designed to assist children in developing and enhancing their gross motor skills. Furthermore, when some children had commented that they had never been to the beach, the school created a large outdoor sand pit called Sandy Cove, with boats nearby for the children to clamber around and use in imaginative play. Finally, in another part of the acre-and-a-half

grounds, plans are currently underway for a new Forest School area.

In supporting parents, the school has an open-door policy, there is an assigned home-school-liaison worker, and many valuable and informative parents' events are organised throughout the year. The school also hosts regular "parents and children" activities to enable families to work creatively together on literacy and art. The principal spoke of her high expectations for all children and reminisced with pride about those former pupils who had returned to inform staff of their subsequent academic successes.

As the old and the new met beside a beautiful floral memorial to Dorothy Coates (née Moore), Arellian's first superintendent, a squirrel scampered across the grass. In true Arellian style, the principal affirmed that, "we keep our children playing out of doors as much as possible. The children think the grounds are their park, and are delighted to play in it every day." She added, "the children are only through our doors for a year, so we have to make it count." Upon leaving this special place, we reflected that Molly McNeill's wishes from almost a century ago have surely been realised for countless children and their families. In the first annual report, she had written, "we do trust that it will be a place of great happiness" (McNeill, 1930, p. 3).

## Conclusion

Arellian Nursery was undoubtedly an "outlier" at the fringes of the traditional, didactic, gendered education system of the 1920s and 1930s. Against the formal backdrop of children being seen and not heard, Arellian's approach to education, influenced by the teachings of Froebel, was ahead of its time. Almost a century later, as we tentatively re-emerge from a global pandemic that has spurred us to re-think our pedagogical approaches in so many ways, we can appreciate especially keenly the pioneering approach adopted by the founders of Arellian. The Arellian principles of fostering the development of the whole child, of encouraging agentic, playful, outdoor learning, and of building strong home-school-community partnerships are arguably more important today than ever before. As we look ahead to the centenary of this remarkable nursery school, we cannot help but feel that we are standing on the shoulders of early years' giants.

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