

# Training Young Women in the “Service” of Motherhood: Early Childhood Education at Detroit’s Merrill-Palmer School, 1920-1940<sup>1</sup>

by

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Early childhood education emerged after World War I as one of many attempts by professionals to deal with changes in the twentieth-century family. Influenced by scientific advances, especially those in psychological theory, child-guidance experts turned their attention to the study of young children as one remedy for restoring healthy families to society. The experts believed that their entry into the family dynamic improved a child’s overall physical and emotional well-being, and the preschool laboratory became the tool with which these experts gained entrance. One of the first three such laboratories in the United States was established in 1922 at the newly organized Merrill-Palmer School for Motherhood and Home Training in Detroit. Begun in 1920 as a center for specialized training in early childhood education, the Merrill-Palmer program offered its students a rare opportunity to observe young children from a variety of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. The School did not compete with universities for students; rather it cooperated with institutions of higher learning by offering specialized courses that were not available at degree-granting universities.

This essay examines the School’s first twenty years of operation (1920-1940) to analyze how a Merrill-Palmer education influenced the lives of some of its first graduates. Scholars have turned to this period to investigate how educating preschoolers and their parents became what historian

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Photograph courtesy of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

**THE FIRST MERRILL-PALMER NURSERY SCHOOL CLASS**

Barbara Beatty has called the “culture of young children” in America.<sup>2</sup> By integrating the changes made in public policy, child welfare, and social reform, their analyses connect this “culture” to national ideas regarding eugenics, immigration, and deviancy. The Merrill-Palmer School in its formative years represents an important yet little-studied avenue through which child-development experts disseminated ideas about child normalcy to parents and teachers. Professionals at Merrill-Palmer interacted with diverse groups of parents and children, but they extended their expertise beyond families in Detroit by training young women to work with and for children at the national level.

The Council on Early Childhood in the Center for Urban Studies at Wayne State University has helped document the history of day care and early childhood education in the Midwest by interviewing sixteen professionals identified as pioneers in their field. For this article I have focused on the lives of seven women interviewed as part of the Council’s oral history project (hereafter referred to as the ECOHP interviews) who either attended the Merrill-Palmer School or interacted with its faculty in a professional capacity during its first twenty years.<sup>3</sup> Their reflections on the

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<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Hamilton Cravens, *Before Headstart: The Iowa Station and America’s Children* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Mary Julia Grant, “Modernizing Motherhood: Child Study Clubs and the Parent Education Movement, 1915-1940” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1992), and “Caught Between Common Sense and Science: The Cornell Study Clubs, 1925-45,” *History of Education Quarterly* 34 (Winter 1994): 433-52; Margot Horn, *Before It’s Too Late: The Child Guidance Movement in the United States, 1922-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Steven L. Schlossman, “Before Home Start: Notes toward a History of Parent Education in America, 1897-1929,” *Harvard Educational Review* 46 (August 1976): 436-67; and Julia Wrigley, “Do Young Children Need Intellectual Stimulation? Experts’ Advice to Parents, 1900-1985,” *History of Education Quarterly* 29 (Spring 1989): 41-75.

<sup>3</sup> The interviews are housed at the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University (hereafter Reuther) under the name Council on Early Education Oral History Project (hereafter ECOHP). Interview selections have also been published in Janet Langlois, *Serving Children Then and Now: An Oral History of Early Childhood Education and Day Care in Metropolitan Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1989). While the interviews serve as the primary source for understanding perceptions, published material has been utilized to verify factual information. For instance, Florence Willson Duhn’s memory of her admission to Merrill-Palmer differs from the school record. Duhn understood that she and her friend Edith Ruggles were the first two students to represent Iowa State College, but in reality the cooperative program had a longer history. Four other women entered in 1927, yet they followed seven Iowa undergraduates who studied at the School in 1926 and six undergraduates who participated in 1925. See student roster in Merrill-Palmer School of Motherhood and Home Training, *The Merrill-Palmer School Biennial Report for 1926 and 1927*

School and on fellow students, faculty, and parents with whom they worked have helped me explore three issues: First, how did their Merrill-Palmer training expand or limit their understanding of appropriate methods of parenting? Second, how did the School's philosophical stance on family preservation direct the ways in which mothers and fathers learned to parent? And third, how did their positions as women from middle-class backgrounds define their professional choices?

Community extension work and research by Merrill-Palmer faculty attracted national attention and would greatly influence developments in the care of children. Its residential training program for college women, however, would earn the School its international reputation. Merrill-Palmer leaders believed that every woman, "whether as mother, teacher, social worker, or merely as relative," confronted problems with children, and should be trained in the proper ways to interact with children.<sup>4</sup> Yet only carefully selected students entered the Merrill-Palmer program.<sup>5</sup> Each year the School accepted about seventy-five women of senior or graduate standing at an institution classified as a Grade A college or university.<sup>6</sup> Young women generally arrived at the School with a Home Economics background from a midwestern or northeastern university and were predominantly white and middle-class. The School admitted, trained, and graduated only one African-American woman during the years 1920-1940—a statistic which underscores the reality of educational segregation in Detroit.<sup>7</sup> It did not restrict its student bodies to single women or American citizens; but the reality of residential group living in the 1920s and 1930s limited the kind of person who found a Merrill-Palmer education appealing.<sup>8</sup>

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(Detroit: Merrill-Palmer School, 1928), and Merrill-Palmer School of Homemaking, *Sixth Annual Report, 1925* (Detroit: Merrill-Palmer School, 1926).

<sup>4</sup> Merrill-Palmer School of Homemaking, *Third Annual Report, 1922* (Detroit: Merrill-Palmer School, 1923), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Merrill-Palmer staff initiated mental tests for all students in April 1926. Details of test results are outlined in Merrill-Palmer, *Biennial Report for 1926 and 1927*, 36-37.

<sup>6</sup> Merrill-Palmer School, *The Merrill-Palmer School: A Report of Twenty Years, 1920-1940* (Detroit: Merrill-Palmer School, 1940), 37.

<sup>7</sup> The Ethel Childs Baker interview offers only a snapshot of the many prejudicial interactions endured by professionally trained women of color living in Detroit during this time. See also John Reid, "'A Career to Build, a People to Serve, a Purpose to Accomplish': Race, Class, Gender and Detroit's First Black Women Teachers, 1865-1916," *Michigan Historical Review* 18:1 (1992): 1-28.

<sup>8</sup> The majority came from coeducational universities such as Michigan Agriculture College; some had attended all-female institutions like Smith College, but they were in the minority.

Inaugurated in 1921, the residential program provided hands-on, professional experience for women attending a four-year university. The acceptance of early childhood education as a respectable career for young, unmarried women gave students a broader range of choices once they arrived at college. For women in the Midwest, the Merrill-Palmer School offered the chance to engage in a specialized line of study without traveling too far from their home communities. Many students also believed that a Merrill-Palmer education helped prepare them for life beyond college when they would need to manage their own households. Groups of four to six women lived together in campus apartments, where they learned to handle household budgets and efficiently organize their time.

These women engaged in a dynamic interdisciplinary curriculum for child development and family life education that included study on and off the campus. Course work, which included guest presentations from a wide array of experts, reflected the scientific emphasis popular in the child study movement.<sup>9</sup> By 1930 a typical schedule at Merrill-Palmer included the courses "Nursery School Procedures," "The Preparation of Children's Food," "Environmental Factors of Child Life," and "Mental Growth and the Development of Character in Young Childhood."<sup>10</sup> Students also earned school credit (and life-changing experiences) by assisting at local day nurseries or with public health programs. Hence, from its beginning a Merrill-Palmer education worked to demonstrate that American families were many-faceted and diverse organisms.

The organizing guidelines for the School also specified that religious training be infused into a Merrill-Palmer education to emphasize the power religion played in many families. To that end the administration secured the consultation services of Dr. George A. Coe, former professor of Religious Education at Columbia University, and speakers committed to missionary work connected students to the world at large. The Sunday afternoon tea served as a traditional forum for these women to mix with an interdenominational group of religious leaders.<sup>11</sup> They learned that as in

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<sup>9</sup> Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 152; Merrill-Palmer, *Biennial Report for 1926 and 1927*, 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> Merrill-Palmer School of Motherhood and Home Training, *Ninth Report, September 1929 to June 1931* (Detroit: Merrill-Palmer School, 1931), 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> I thank Maria Quinlan Leiby, an alumna of Smith College, who helped me understand the student/faculty tea; it remains an important and very special memory of her college experience, because it allowed her and her classmates to mingle with their professors in an informal and nurturing environment. Memoirs of Merrill-Palmer students communicate similar sentiments. For details on religious instruction at the School, see Merrill-Palmer, *Biennial Report for 1926 and 1927*, 33.

many American cities, religious communities in Detroit accepted responsibility for organizing relief efforts for their members and that many of these recipients would also benefit from instruction in proper nutrition, health, and safety for children.

In their ECOHP interviews Merrill-Palmer alumnae reveal a keen awareness of their advantaged positions in society. Most came from middle-class families. But native-born European-American and African-American women experienced middle-class life in radically different ways.<sup>12</sup> A comparison of two alumnae shows that whereas race allowed most Merrill-Palmer students to assume their right to these privileges, an African American had no such assurance.

Ethel Childs (later Baker), the only African-American student to attend Merrill-Palmer during this time, grew up in Detroit and attended Detroit public schools through high school. After graduating from Alabama State University in Montgomery in 1935, she taught first grade in Talledega County, Alabama for two years. When she returned to Detroit in 1937, the Depression left few opportunities for an educated African-American woman. The Department of Public Education in Detroit recommended that she work at Detroit's oldest settlement house, Franklin Street Settlement; however, the "job" turned out to be volunteer service in the day nursery. Desperate for any opportunity, in January 1938 Childs began volunteering at Franklin Street. Her talents were immediately recognized by the director, who suggested she study at the Merrill-Palmer School. Because of her race, Childs never gave the idea serious consideration. Undaunted, the settlement director invited Merrill-Palmer instructor Ellen Miller into Franklin Street to observe Childs's skill with the children. Within six months the School offered her a scholarship to join its graduate student body as its first African-American student.<sup>13</sup>

Florence Willson (later Duhn) was a native-born European American

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<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham has articulated the ways in which race influences the experience of such social constructions as class, sexuality, and gender in her pivotal essay, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 251-74. She uses this theoretical advance in her *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); class is specifically analyzed in 204-11. Darlene Clark Hine addresses the conflicts facing African-American women who migrated to the Midwest in "Black Migration to the Urban Midwest: The Gender Dimension, 1915-1945," in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of African American History* (Brooklyn, NY: Carleton Publishing, 1994), 87-108.

<sup>13</sup> Ethel Childs Baker, interview, ECOHP, 1. Baker found her volunteer work "most invigorating." Franklin Street personnel obviously appreciated having a trained educator in their nursery as they began to give her carfare to ensure her presence at the center.

from Hamilton County, Iowa. Her country doctor father had discouraged her from entering nursing because he believed that the work was too hard. Willson's mother had been a schoolteacher before she married and used these teaching skills to enrich her children's developmental growth. It was her mother's dedication to providing an educationally rounded home life that led Willson to explore early childhood education as a career for herself. Iowa State College at Ames proved a good choice because it was only nineteen miles from her hometown. She entered Merrill-Palmer in 1927 as a senior and would stay to complete graduate work in child development. One of her favorite courses introduced her to community service and took her into the working-class neighborhoods of Detroit to render on-site child guidance at settlement houses.<sup>14</sup>

Although middle-class status defined students' roles as professionals and as women, race created stark differences in the way they experienced their Merrill-Palmer education. Whereas Willson relished her time spent in Detroit settlement houses as an unique opportunity to *observe* poverty, Childs understood that the time she had spent volunteering at Franklin Street had been her ticket into Merrill-Palmer as its first African-American student.

When the School opened in 1920, Detroit had become the fourth largest city in the country and an important destination for thousands of migrants and immigrants.<sup>15</sup> Settlement houses and religious organizations had been serving the childcare needs of Detroit's working-class families, and middle-class women had already organized themselves into mothers'

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<sup>14</sup> Florence [Willson] Duhn, interview, ECOHP, 20, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Of 528,000 people who moved to Detroit between 1910 and 1920, American migrants totaled 412,000 or 78 percent. Sidney Bolkosky has analyzed Jewish immigration in *Harmony and Dissonance: Voices of Jewish Identity in Detroit, 1914-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991). On the migration of Mexican Americans into Detroit see Juan R. Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); Dennis Nodin Valdés, *El Pueblo Mexicano en Detroit y Michigan: A Social History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982); and Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For African Americans, see Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Migration to the Urban Midwest," and "Black Women in the Middle West: The Michigan Experience," in *Hine Sight*, 59-107; Richard W. Thomas, "The Black Urban Experience in Detroit: 1916-1967," in *Blacks and Chicanos in Urban Michigan*, ed. Homer C. Hawkins and Richard W. Thomas (Lansing: Michigan History Division, Department of State, 1979); and Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). The northern migration of white, native-born families displaced from tenant farming is analyzed in John W. Carey, "A History of the Brightmoor Community Center" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1941).

clubs.<sup>16</sup> But teaching mothers how best to care for their children became the project of professionals from both the private and public sectors.<sup>17</sup> Historians who have analyzed Detroit's residential patterns find that ethnicity and race rather than class became the distinguishing factor in the establishment of neighborhoods in the nineteenth century. By the 1920s, however, class influenced residential guidelines as middle-class families moved from center city to the suburbs, leaving working-class families isolated within their ethnic and racial enclaves.<sup>18</sup> It was within this constellation of racial, ethnic, and class divisions that the Merrill-Palmer School of Motherhood and Home Training began to operate.

On 17 May 1916 Michigan philanthropist Lizzie Merrill Palmer bequeathed her entire estate to develop a school that would train young women in the work of mothering and homemaking.<sup>19</sup> The language of her will attests to her strong opinions regarding the relationship between women's roles and strong families:

I hold profoundly the conviction that the welfare of any community is divinely, and hence inseparably, dependent upon the quality of its motherhood, and the spirit and character of its homes. . . .<sup>20</sup>

Palmer died two months later, and within four years her legacy had established a school in her name. Palmer believed that women's careful "service" as wives and mothers could improve society and her wealth allowed her to promote this popular sentiment. By devoting her fortune to

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<sup>16</sup> In the years 1920-1940 Detroit working families had access to about twenty settlement houses. While their numbers differ, Judith Ann Trolander and Janet Langlois provide introductory information on programming at Detroit settlement houses. See Trolander, *Settlement Houses and the Great Depression* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 161-62; and Langlois, *Serving Children Then and Now*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> The sources in notes 2 and 36 address this.

<sup>18</sup> On the development of these racial and ethnic enclaves see Marietta Lynn Baba and Malvine Hank Abonyi, *Mexicans of Detroit* (Detroit: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1979); Richard Jules Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It*; Valdés, *El Pueblo Mexicano en Detroit y Michigan*; Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*; and Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>19</sup> Widow of Ohio Senator Thomas W. Palmer, Lizzie Merrill Palmer had no children of her own. She died on 28 July 1916, leaving property valued at \$3,000,000 for the establishment of the school. See Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 152.

<sup>20</sup> Merrill-Palmer, *Third Annual Report*, 1.



the project of training young women in the “management, supervision, direction, and inspiration of homes,” she ensured that her ideals positioning women in the private sphere would become institutionalized.<sup>21</sup>

School trustees embraced early childhood education as the instrument to promote Palmer’s convictions. They entrusted the project to a group of female educators trained in Home Economics, committed to community service, and dedicated to advanced education for women. Merrill-Palmer faculty established their professional authority by reaching out to both the local Detroit community and national child study organizations. For example, when the Child Study Association of America created the National Council of Parent Education in 1925 as a way to distribute parenting information nationally, they appointed Merrill-Palmer School director Edna Noble White as its chairwoman.<sup>22</sup> By devoting resources to three areas—education, research and community service—School faculty hoped to expand their influence beyond middle-class, college-educated women and reach into Detroit’s working-class neighborhoods.

School personnel worked first with the American Red Cross and the Detroit Public Schools to try to improve the care and nutrition of children living in the city. Merrill-Palmer officials believed they had not “fully met [their] public obligation until demonstration of methods for reaching that large portion of young women who do not attend universities, yet do become mothers, are made.”<sup>23</sup> To that end they embarked on a series of programs with public and private enterprises in the city of Detroit, Wayne County, and Michigan. They became particularly concerned with girls labeled juvenile delinquents who seemed likely to become mothers at an early age. With little chance of attending high school, let alone college, these girls were at high risk of raising malnourished, ill-educated, and even delinquent children. These girls fit Lizzie Merrill Palmer’s mission of training and “disciplin[ing]” young women and girls over the age of ten years to “mentally, morally, physically, and religiously” inspire their families.<sup>24</sup> Authorities throughout the region soon recognized Merrill-Palmer’s work with girls who were sent to detention homes or were studying at continuation schools, and they began contracting with the School to provide homemaking education at their institutions.

Much of the credit for shaping the School’s agenda can be traced to the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 152; Merrill-Palmer, *Biennial Report for 1926 and 1927*, 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> Merrill-Palmer, *Sixth Annual Report*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Merrill-Palmer, *Third Annual Report*, 1.

leadership of director Edna Noble White who fashioned the cooperative arrangement between Merrill-Palmer and the universities.<sup>25</sup> Using her academic and government connections, White campaigned to establish the Merrill-Palmer School as the premiere child development center in the United States.<sup>26</sup> In 1921 White traveled to England to study nursery education with experts in London who had been successfully using the nursery school since 1913 to monitor and enhance the physical growth of young children.<sup>27</sup> White then hired an English woman as head teacher for the Merrill-Palmer preschool laboratory, which she hoped would become the model for nursery school education in the United States.

Students who chose a Merrill-Palmer education held similar career goals and harbored like values regarding education, family structures, and cultural influences; they agreed that understanding family relations was the key to interpreting a child's growth and that observation during the child's early years was necessary for any sort of scientific effect on family dynamics.<sup>28</sup> They understood the preschool laboratory to be their most important asset in this endeavor, and the nursery school experience became Merrill-Palmer's main recruitment tool. Yet when women arrived in Detroit they often faced new discoveries regarding their perceptions of family. For many, community extension work would be their first encounter with the urban working classes, and some found themselves rethinking their impressions about appropriate behaviors among families.

From the School's first project, Merrill-Palmer faculty and students

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<sup>25</sup> Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 152; Merrill-Palmer, *Sixth Annual Report*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 152. White graduated from the University of Illinois in 1906. She taught home economics at Ohio State University for seven years and during World War I was the Ohio director of food conservation for the Council of Defense Work.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 134, 152.

<sup>28</sup> Edna Noble White, "The Director's Report, 1920-1940," in *A Report of Twenty Years*, 18.



Photograph courtesy of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

**EDNA NOBLE WHITE, c. 1919**

worked to meet the needs of Detroit parents from all walks of life, and they consciously extended their expertise to impoverished parents who were otherwise isolated from educational advancements. White advanced this position when she wrote in the School's twenty-year report:

The children of a nation are its greatest potential asset, and since the most effective environment ever yet provided for them is the family, its preservation and promotion would seem to be essential to the preservation of society. . . . Through their contacts with community agencies and the families reached by these agencies the Merrill-Palmer students develop greater sympathy and understanding and are given a concept of a multivalent world.<sup>29</sup>

It was this agenda to preserve and promote the "family" that prompted the School to seek out projects with working-class parents. The School's primary contact came through county and state services. In November 1921 it collaborated with the Detroit International Institute in a study of dietary habits among various ethnic groups who had immigrated to the United States since the turn of the century.<sup>30</sup> Like many studies of its time, the School's nutrition experts reported that children from these families needed more milk in their diets. A simple solution was to lower milk prices and Merrill-Palmer nutritionists became advocates for milk price adjustments. This study was the first of many undertaken by the School and illustrates how early childhood educators began to effect change at the local and national level. They recognized the reality that many families simply could not afford to properly feed their children. School nutritionist Catherine M. Brown noted:

It is often difficult to consider the nutritional needs of the children adequately in cases where the money is low or the mother is overworked or does not understand the importance of the problem because it seems self-evident that the efficiency of the man who is the wage-earner is the first consideration.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 18, 40.

<sup>30</sup> The study listed the following ethnic groups: Italian, Russian, Mexican, Armenian, Albanian, Bulgarian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, and Swedish.

<sup>31</sup> Catherine M. Brown, "Study of Nutrition Problems of Different Nationalities, 1922-1923," Folder 3, "Foreign Born: Reports, 1921-35," Box 37, Merrill-Palmer Kresge Historical Library Collection [hereafter MP], Reuther.

Merrill-Palmer educators may have misinterpreted the priorities of working-class families when they concluded that these women placed the health of the male head of the household before their children's well-being. This critical assessment has been contradicted by immigration historian Donna Gabaccia, who has studied the ways gender roles influenced change in the lives of families immigrating to the United States during the twentieth century. Gabaccia has shown that immigrant families placed a high value on the health and education of their children, and that they believed they could, through tireless work, ensure the survival of their children in America.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Merrill-Palmer faculty continued campaigns to change workers' diets and hygiene by sponsoring extension classes and by training public health nurses and other child-help workers.<sup>33</sup>

Within a few years, interactions with immigrant mothers surprised Merrill-Palmer instructors, who found themselves adjusting their advice to recognize some benefits to ethnic food preferences. Rather than insist that immigrant women abandon traditional meals, for instance, the nutritionists invited women to cook for them, and then subtly adjusted the preparation and food products to meet American nutritional guidelines. Through scientific evaluation instructors learned that a typical meal of pasta with a tomato sauce served the nutritional needs of a family just as well as a potato-based "American" meal.

Biases regarding immigrant behavior and intellect, however, often figured into assessments of these mothers, as some faculty equated a participant's interest and progress in the class with her ability to speak English. Finnish women who "spoke good English" were described as "one of the most interesting and responsive foreign groups" ever taught, whereas instructors judged Mexican and Italian-speaking women "ignorant."<sup>34</sup> By the time the Depression had settled into Detroit, Merrill-Palmer personnel became impatient with their foreign-language-speaking clients. In her report on an Italian mothers' class, faculty member Leila McGuire complained that "the mothers were mostly peasant women and very ignorant. Because of

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<sup>32</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the US, 1820-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> See Leila McGuire, "Classes for Foreign Groups, January 1924-January 1925," in Folder 3, "Foreign Born: Reports, 1921-35," Box 37, MP; Claire M. Sanders, "Parental Education in the Mother's Pension Department of Detroit," 63-66, in Folder 5, "Conferences; Parental Education, 1926," Box 26, MP; and Merrill-Palmer School, *Tenth Report, 1931-1933* (Detroit: Merrill-Palmer, 1934), 72, 77.

<sup>34</sup> "Extension Work with Foreign Groups, 1928," and "Annual Report September 1931-June 1933," both in Folder 3, "Foreign Born: Reports, 1921-35," Box 37, MP.



Photograph courtesy of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

**NURSERY SCHOOL STUDENTS AT PLAY OUTDOORS,  
MAY 1928**

low attendance and illness class was discontinued.”<sup>35</sup>

Despite these kinds of judgments by certain faculty members (and certainly by some students), community extension work proved rewarding for many Merrill-Palmer women. Beginning in 1925 qualified students assisted Wayne County with instructing Mothers’ Pension families in nutrition. County administration assigned two families to each student, who also monitored children’s body weights and general health conditions throughout the year.<sup>36</sup> In the first year Merrill-Palmer students attended to the children of sixteen mothers, and county personnel reported their hope for continued student involvement.<sup>37</sup>

Sociologist Julia Wrigley has argued that care providers in day nurseries regularly devalued the cultural practices of their clients, and experts generally found fault with what they viewed as absence of nurturing among working-class families. Instead, lack of leisure time forced poor parents to sacrifice hours that might have been spent in bonding with their children to the tasks of providing food, shelter, and clothing to their children. But most early childhood educators defined good parenting through their interactions with parents who could afford to enroll children in nursery schools.<sup>38</sup> In describing her introduction to child study, Florence Willson Duhn noted, “Fortunately, fortunately, they [Merrill-Palmer] decided to start with the cream of the crop parents, the best, and then work down to children who were less privileged.”<sup>39</sup> Obviously, class position (and consequently race and ethnicity) defined parenting skills for Willson Duhn. Parents who could afford to devote attention to their children along scientifically determined lines became the “cream of the crop,” and Willson

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<sup>35</sup> “Extension Work with Foreign Groups, 1928,” Folder 3, Box 37, MP.

<sup>36</sup> Mothers’ Pensions were devised by Progressive reformers as a way to keep some impoverished mothers (such as widows or the wives of disabled men) out of wage labor, so that they could care for their children at home. On the value of Mothers’ Pensions to women in the early twentieth century, see *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), particularly Michel, “The Limits of Maternalism: Policies toward American Wage-Earning Mothers during the Progressive Era,” 277-320; Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and Gwendolyn Mink, *Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Sanders, “Parental Education,” 63-66.

<sup>38</sup> Julia Wrigley, “Children’s Caregivers and Ideologies of Parental Inadequacy,” in *Circle of Care: Work and Identity in Women’s Lives*, ed. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 290-312.

<sup>39</sup> Willson Duhn, interview, ECOHP, 11.



Photograph courtesy of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

**A MERRILL-PALMER NURSERY SCHOOL STUDENT  
BEING EXAMINED BY A NURSE FOR SIGNS  
OF A COLD OR OTHER DISEASE**



Duhn based her standards on work with “privileged” parents.

The experiences of students Ann Linn and Esther Dean Callard illustrate how young educators reacted when they entered the world of the day nursery. Linn described how she had worked with an Italian-speaking family whose father had been permanently injured at the Ford Motor Company in the early 1930s. The man had received only \$500 in compensation and never worked again. Forced to live on government and community assistance, the family continually struggled to make ends meet. Linn came into contact with one of his children while working in a WPA Nursery in Detroit. Emergency nursery schools developed as a Works Progress Administration project and gave many early childhood educators their first professional experiences in childcare. At that time, Merrill-Palmer tested each child’s IQ and conducted a thorough physical examination. This man’s son first tested at an IQ of only 60, but the staff noticed that after interaction with the other children in the nursery he began to develop socially and even displayed leadership skills: as Linn explained, “a kid with an IQ of 60 doesn’t usually do that.”<sup>40</sup> Six months later, the child’s IQ had increased to 95. The educators attributed the boy’s remarkable improvement to his interaction with English-speaking adults and children, but their assessment did not account for the trouble an English-language IQ test would have posed for a child whose family did not use English at home. As all IQ tests were given in English, foreign-speaking children naturally tested poorly.

Esther Dean Callard, an education student at Wayne State University, observed the Merrill-Palmer method during a visit to the preschool laboratory. Callard described her vision of children painting and playing freely in the sand as “heaven,” and credited her decision to enter the field of child development to that experience. She wanted to introduce other children to the Merrill-Palmer model that nurtured their independent, free-thinking abilities. Although delighted to work in the school’s WPA nurseries, Callard encountered cultural clashes in her Merrill-Palmer “heaven.” Observing poverty for the first time, she discovered economic oppression’s ugly reality when home visits introduced her to floors littered with mattresses. But Callard also realized that one need not enjoy sandboxes and colorful paints to be a happy child. She learned to appreciate

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<sup>40</sup> Ann Linn, interview, ECOHP, 3. Linn graduated from Wayne State University in 1934 with a degree in education. As an unemployed teacher, she was hired through the WPA to work in the day nursery.



Photograph courtesy of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

### STUDENTS PLAYING WITH CLAY, 1932

Polish immigrant mothers who breast-fed their three-year-old toddlers during lunch breaks and hovered over their other children with a keen concern for their safety. Callard summed up this initial experience as “very rewarding,” explaining that “I had never been with other cultures and I had a lot to learn and it was difficult.” Not only did the WPA nurseries open her eyes to a new world; Callard also believed they “made a great contribution to those children.”<sup>41</sup>

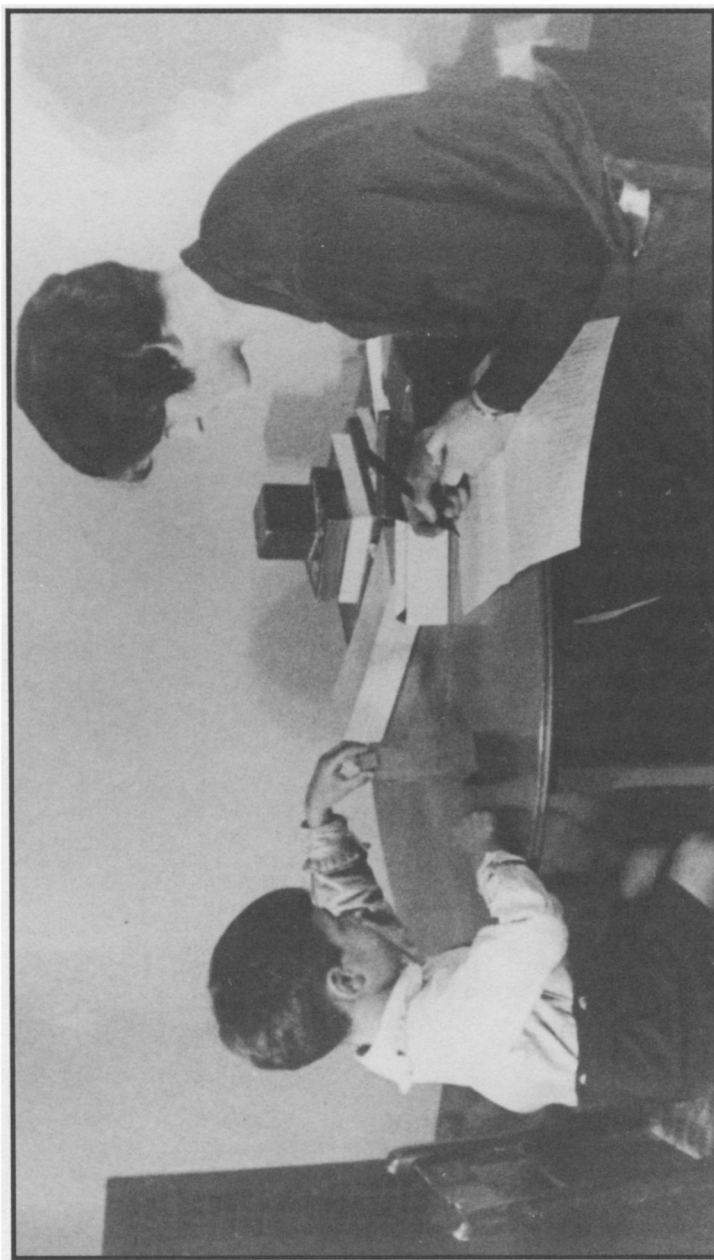
By the 1920s mothers across the nation had organized themselves into child-study clubs. In the Detroit area, child study flourished within many socioeconomic and ethnic communities. The School regularly received invitations to facilitate meetings of economically privileged groups such as the College and Women’s City Club and middle-class clubs like the Junior League and the Detroit Council of Jewish Women. Working-class parents involved with local settlement houses also asked for Merrill-Palmer experts to sit in on their sessions.<sup>42</sup> Detroit mothers were often joined by fathers; only men from the wealthiest families did not express a desire to participate in parent education. Merrill-Palmer administrative reports indicate that husbands of Junior League and Jewish Council women organized their own study groups and met during their lunch hours or in a father’s home in the evening. Neighborhood Settlement House parents gathered as couples at the center, receiving guidance from advanced Merrill-Palmer students who in turn earned extension work credit. True to contemporary ideas regarding race, class and ethnicity, School officials deemed settlement-house parents suitable training subjects for their students but reserved expert faculty interaction for upper- and middle-class parents.

Nursery schooling for children of prosperous parents remained the centerpiece of a Merrill-Palmer education. Interactions between Merrill-Palmer educators and Detroit parents reinforced notions of the ideal family as nuclear, white, and middle-class. Although some encounters with working-class parents produced enlightened reactions, faculty and students generally maintained a position of authority and never questioned their right to suggest alternative ways of parenting to immigrant or newly-migrated families. While community service fitted nicely into Merrill-Palmer’s “experiment” in educating the family, public health and settlement programs played a secondary role to advising middle-class parents and training women as child development experts. Students and faculty commonly referred to parents involved in the nursery school as “a very

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<sup>41</sup> Esther Dean Callard, interview, ECOHP, 7.

<sup>42</sup> “Extension: Reports, 1923-40,” Folder 2, Box 32, MP.



Photograph courtesy of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

**“MENTAL TEST: BUILDING THE LITTLE PINK TOWER”  
MERRILL-PALMER, 1932**

strongly devoted parents group.”<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, they did not classify these people as homogeneous, but saw them as diverse families who represented the “wide variety of elements found in what is called the ‘great middle class.’”<sup>44</sup> Although alumnae had fond memories of their interactions with working-class parents, they often found their contact with these mothers and fathers unpredictable and frustrating. By contrast, Merrill-Palmer women considered exchanges with middle-class parents intellectually stimulating.

These class-based notions of parenthood directed the ways in which the Merrill-Palmer community utilized the nursery school as an educational tool: in the minds of these educators, standardizing parenthood and childhood was crucial to forming healthy families. In 1924 child psychologist Helen Thompson Woolley, and her student, Elizabeth Cleveland, created the Merrill-Palmer Scale of Mental Tests to measure children’s physical, mental, emotional, and social development. They argued that parents needed child development experts to help them monitor the regularity of their child’s diet, habits, and growth; nursery schools would track these changes for middle-class families. Woolley and Cleveland also believed that nursery schools gave children a much-needed respite from domineering or nervous mothers.<sup>45</sup>

Barbara Beatty has found that most parent-education programs based at university nursery schools geared their efforts toward middle- and upper-class parents, especially college-educated mothers.<sup>46</sup> Merrill-Palmer fit this pattern as it devoted a variety of resources to middle-class women. In establishing its Advisory Service for College Women, the School devised a method both to guide college-educated women with career plans and to

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<sup>43</sup> Marjorie Sanger, interview, ECOHP, 44. Sanger completed a master’s degree in 1940 from Boston University and worked in some of the most prestigious nursery programs in the country, including the Ruggles Street Nursery School in Boston. During the 1940s she taught in the preschool laboratory at the Child Welfare Research Station at the University of Iowa before joining Merrill-Palmer in 1948.

<sup>44</sup> Merrill-Palmer School, *A Report of Twenty Years*, 32.

<sup>45</sup> When Helen Thompson Woolley joined Merrill-Palmer in 1922 her career seemed promising. From 1923 to 1925 she served as vice president of the American Association of University Women, incorporating parental and preparental education into the AAUW’s agenda. In 1925 she became the head of the Institute of Child Welfare at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her publishing record reflected a feverish pace—twenty-six research-oriented articles between 1922 and 1925—but in 1924 she and her husband separated and one year later deteriorating health forced her to resign her position at Teachers College. See Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 155–56.

<sup>46</sup> Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 136–68.

create a pool of qualified clients for its nursery school. During 1933-1935 the Advisory Service gave thirty-nine pregnant women information on prenatal/infant care and the value of a nursery school education.<sup>47</sup> School officials also focused on the father's involvement in raising a child by encouraging his attendance at the mother's prenatal and infant-health screening appointments.<sup>48</sup> Strategies for incorporating fathers into parental education included scheduling lectures and group discussions in the evenings for their convenience.<sup>49</sup>

Students and faculty accepted the policy of using race, class, and ethnicity to determine which children would attend their nursery school, which mothers would benefit from child study, and which fathers would invest energy into parenting. Because only European-American children attended the nursery school, child-development educators continued Progressive-Era practices of serving children along racial lines. Because wage-earning parents could not afford the preschool laboratory experience, Merrill-Palmer enthusiasts allowed economic class to define the parameters for appropriate mother/father roles. And because early childhood experts used ethnicity as a marker for intelligence, they could justify reserving observation programs for the "best" families.

In addition to these nursery-based programs, though, Merrill-Palmer faculty also led in devising national childcare agendas, such as establishing parent-education guidelines for Depression-era emergency programs and initiating childcare support for workers employed in war manufacturing during the 1940s. These efforts demonstrate the continuing concern of Merrill-Palmer educators for working-class Detroit parents. Although the School's promotional and scholarly literature concentrated on native-born, white, middle-class, and nuclear families, by the 1930s Merrill-Palmer

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<sup>47</sup> Merrill-Palmer School, *Eleventh Report, September 1933-June 1935* (Detroit: Merrill-Palmer School, 1936), 38-39.

<sup>48</sup> The participation of early-twentieth-century, middle-class fathers in raising their children has recently been reevaluated by sociologists Ralph LaRossa and Donald C. Reitzes, who have analyzed advice-seeking letters written to Angelo Patri, a popular child guidance "expert," between 1925 and 1929. They argue (most tentatively) that the presence of letters written by fathers counters the common understanding of absent and/or noninvolved fathers, and suggests that middle-class fathers involved themselves as fully as late-twentieth-century fathers in their children's care. See LaRossa and Reitzes, "Gendered Perceptions of Father Involvement in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57 (1995): 223-29. In *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), LaRossa establishes these findings to show the varied and complex involvement of fathers in the care of children during the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>49</sup> Merrill Palmer, *Biennial Report for 1926 and 1927*, 46; *Eighth Report*, 19; *Tenth Report*, 46.

faculty and students did not turn away from the pressing problems faced by many other American households.

The presence of the Merrill-Palmer School ultimately affected the ways in which Detroit wage-earners found quality childcare. Although Merrill-Palmer enthusiasts did not set innovative or even radical childcare policy, they did serve as advocates for increasing day care resources. Yet as sociologist Emily D. Cahan has pointed out, class biases continued to play an important role in child-study and day-care programs.<sup>50</sup> Program evaluators argued that one learned the science of child growth and development by studying “normal” children; to Merrill-Palmer experts, that translated into children with “full-time” mothers. This limited, albeit contemporary, understanding of “normal” failed to recognize the realities of working-class families and confined appropriate parenting within a narrowly raced and classed heterosexual familial structure.

Nevertheless, during its first twenty years the Merrill-Palmer community began to alter its ideologies regarding the race, class, and ethnicity of its family clients and student educators. Merrill-Palmer administrators took leadership roles in advancing cooperative ties between the provision of childcare for working parents and early childhood education. But contemporary attitudes stifled their efforts to foster change; postwar America clung to class-based standards of parenting and cultural biases that deemed the nuclear, white, middle-class model the best for every child no matter what her race or ethnicity.<sup>51</sup>

The School began welcoming international students in the 1930s, but it struggled with allowing nonwhite American students into its program. Although the inadvertent admission of African-American Ethel Childs helped to desegregate the school in 1938, until the 1960s the average student continued to be a young, white, middle-class, unmarried woman. Florence Willson Duhn was a typical Merrill-Palmer student. She believed that in choosing the School she had expanded her horizons and surrounded herself with a diverse group. For Willson Duhn, a young woman from small-town Iowa, city-based Merrill-Palmer “was a wonderful melting pot of students.”<sup>52</sup> Childs Baker, on the other hand, understood that her admission represented a contribution to that diversity: she knew the tension

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<sup>50</sup> Emily D. Cahan, *Past Caring: A History of US Preschool Care and Education for the Poor, 1820-1965* (New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, School of Public Health, Columbia University, 1989), 2.

<sup>51</sup> Julia Wrigley, “Different Care for Different Kids: Social Class and Child Care Policy,” *Educational Policy* 3 (1989): 421-39.

<sup>52</sup> Langlois, *Serving Children Then and Now*, 26.

that her admission caused and believed her experience with southern life had influenced School officials to consider her application. She noted:

The reason they had asked me to come in as a student [was that] I had been a student in a black college in the south and they thought I understood segregation, which I did. However, what they forgot was that I had had all my schooling from first grade to high school in Detroit and there was a difference.<sup>53</sup>

Childs Baker's memory of her entry into Merrill-Palmer is noteworthy: she remembers acting director Mary Sweeney arranging it during an absence by White.<sup>54</sup> According to Childs Baker, the timing was fortuitous in that White was "very, very surprised and not overjoyed" to find her enrolled in the program.<sup>55</sup> However, Student Affairs Committee minutes record an open discussion among the faculty, including White, concerning Childs's admission. In fact, the director was quite concerned about "possible complications" from the presence of a "colored" student on campus and urged Sweeney to prepare Childs for a likely unpleasant atmosphere. The faculty agreed that her tuition would be waived and they gave Sweeney full power to act accordingly.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps White's angst reflected the prevalence of racial segregation and discrimination in Detroit. The Merrill-Palmer School, equipped to serve the daughters of midwestern and northeastern white families, had sheltered itself from the reality of black professional women.<sup>57</sup> But in September 1938 Sweeney notified the Student Affairs Committee that after many "frank" conversations with Childs regarding the "possible need for discretion in some situations," she had offered her a graduate student position at the

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<sup>53</sup> Baker, interview, ECOHP, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Sweeney joined Merrill-Palmer in 1925 to chair its Physical Growth and Development department. She replaced Thompson Woolley as assistant director in the academic year 1928-29. Sweeney held an M.S. and an M.A. from the University of Kentucky and Columbia University respectively. Prior to her arrival at Merrill-Palmer, she had been the chair of Home Economics at the University of Kentucky and the dean of Home Economics at Michigan Agriculture College (now Michigan State University). See Merrill-Palmer, *Sixth Annual Report*, 15.

<sup>55</sup> Baker, interview, ECOHP, 3.

<sup>56</sup> "Student Affairs Committee: Report 1931-40."

<sup>57</sup> Darden et al., *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*, esp. ch. 3, "Patterns of Race and Class Disparity," 67-108; Hine, "Black Migration to the Urban Midwest," and "Black Women in the Middle West"; Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It*; Reid, "'A Career to Build, a People to Serve, a Purpose to Accomplish.'"



School.<sup>58</sup>

As a black woman, Childs could not use the student lavatory or coat closet. An unspoken understanding of segregation forced her to walk across the street to the public library for facilities, hang her coat in the basement, and eat her lunch alone. When faced with the prejudicial “policies” and racial ostracism of some staff and students, Childs turned to Ellen M. Miller, who had been supportive of her admission from the beginning. Minutes of meetings and reports suggest that Miller was a confidante of sorts for many Merrill-Palmer students. Having been with the School since its inception, Miller’s expertise lay in extension work. She taught the first demonstration courses to immigrant women that had been contracted by the Detroit International Institute and continued to direct outreach programs. Surprised to hear of Childs’s dilemma, Miller informed the student of her right to use facilities on Merrill-Palmer property and urged her to begin sharing these services with the other students.<sup>59</sup> When interviewed in 1988 Childs Baker demonstrated little animosity toward her fellow students and reported that after her talk with Miller she began eating lunch with a white woman who also volunteered at Franklin Street and became her good friend.<sup>60</sup> Although she endured prejudice and discrimination, Childs did connect with some students and remembered fondly her friendship with another white woman:

One of the young girls from Atlanta said to me when I sat down at the table in the library, “You know, I’ve never sat with a Nigra before, not even my nanny!” I said, “Well my name is Ethel Childs and I hope that we can be friends.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Baker, interview, ECOHP.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.; “Student Affairs Committee: Reports 1931-40.” Complete documentation for the years 1938, 1939, and 1940 is missing from the archives, preventing further checking of the manner in which the School dealt with racial prejudice. Categories of files missing for these years include Student Rosters, Student Affairs Committee Meetings, and Faculty Meetings.

<sup>60</sup> Fellow student (Louise L.) Sally Brown interviewed Ethel Childs Baker in 1988 as part of ECOHP and confessed that she had only learned of the ostracism at the end of the school year. Yet according to Baker, several students were aware that she ate alone but chose to do nothing.

<sup>61</sup> Baker, interview, ECOHP, 3. I am reminded of bell hooks’s provocative assessment of white women’s attitudes toward women of color and the regional differences that may influence the ways in which northern and southern white women view their interactions with women of color. In *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*, hooks writes, “I had not known white women were ignorant of the impact of race and class on their social status and consciousness. (Southern white women often have a more realistic perspective on racism and classism than

The entry of Ethel Childs into their community forced School personnel to reevaluate its student population. They came to no decisions by 1940 and in fact retained racist ideas about the quality of nonwhite students' performances. But the conversations had started. The January 1939 Student Affairs Committee meeting, for instance, focused on race from two distinct angles: the discovery of a quality nursery school program at an all-black college and discussion of admission policies regarding "colored students."<sup>62</sup> A visit by Leila McGuire to Bennett College at Greensboro, North Carolina over the 1938-39 winter break sparked the discussion, as she described the facility as "a very well planned, beautifully equipped, modern nursery school." Bennett College president David D. Jones had requested Merrill-Palmer's assistance with child-development instruction, and the faculty discussed recommending Childs for that role. Obviously they saw Childs's race as a key factor in this recommendation, yet considering the high standards to which they held their students, one must assume that they also believed in her work as a child-development expert.

But their support of Childs ran counter to their other decision regarding desegregation. The Committee members concluded that "caution must be exercised" when considering admitting African-American women to Merrill-Palmer.<sup>63</sup> Their concerns centered on beliefs that nonwhite students would not have the proper foundational training or be able to maintain a rigorous academic pace. By the end of Merrill-Palmer's first twenty years, the presence of qualified African-American students, professionals, and institutions had confused and challenged but not fully reversed the faculty's assumptions about race and ability.

In spite of these conflicts, Childs graduated in May 1939 and received an offer to teach in New Orleans. Having overcome racial injustices at Merrill-Palmer, she now faced constraining attitudes regarding marital status and professional opportunities for women. Her marriage in September 1939 eliminated any possibility of Childs pursuing her teaching career. In fact, her husband forbade her even to interview for a position at a nursery school in Detroit. As historian Jacqueline Jones explains, during Reconstruction and into the twentieth century, it became a priority of African-American men to keep their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters out of the wage labor force—and especially away from work that would bring them into white

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white women in other areas of the United States.)" hooks, *Feminist Theory: from margin to center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 10.

<sup>62</sup> "Student Affairs Committee: Reports 1931-40."

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

homes.<sup>64</sup> Instead, Childs Baker stayed active in early childhood education by volunteering and returned to paid employment only after her children were grown and out of college. She started a PTA group which consisted mostly of Polish immigrants and noted that “even though some of them [the parents] were not too well-versed in the English language, they did come and help, and they showed their interest by coming.”<sup>65</sup> Childs Baker attributed her understanding of the problems children in the 1960s and 1970s experienced (such as the unavailability of before- and after-school care) to her initial work in Franklin Street Settlement.<sup>66</sup> She also wanted her children to experience preschool, and in 1941 she enrolled her son in the Peter Pan Nursery which had opened in 1936 as the first private nursery school in Detroit for African-American families.

After World War II, Merrill-Palmer programs finally began enrolling children of color. In 1945 three African-American children entered the nursery school, and two years later Childs Baker’s son became the first African-American child to enjoy the School’s summer camp for elementary-age children.<sup>67</sup> Although the years of persistent protest by African-American groups (as well as the tumultuous race riots of 1943) had far more to do with integration at Merrill-Palmer, the tentative acceptance of Ethel Childs Baker and extension work with African-American mothers had laid the groundwork.<sup>68</sup>

Women involved with the Merrill-Palmer School in its first twenty years found their experiences invigorating, challenging, and rewarding; as professionals in a growing field, they understood the privilege of training with premier experts. For instance, Marjorie Sanger, who joined the Merrill-Palmer faculty in 1948 as the nursery-school director, described her education as “a very exciting thing to be the student in a generation that

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<sup>64</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

<sup>65</sup> Baker, interview, ECOHP, 26.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>67</sup> Langlois, *Serving Children Then and Now*, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Merrill-Palmer, Tenth Report, 71. The Merrill-Palmer community worked with mothers at the Lucy Thurman Branch of the Detroit YWCA. Groups engaged in active protest included the Detroit Urban League, the NAACP, the Housewives’ League of Detroit, the YWCA and the YMCA, the National Association of Colored Women, and churches like the Bethel AME. For studies on racial “uplift” in Detroit see Hine, “The Housewives’ League of Detroit: Black Women and Economic Nationalism,” and “‘We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible’: The Philanthropic Work of Black Women,” in *Hine Sight*, 129-45, 109-28; Richard W. Thomas, “The Black Urban Experience in Detroit,” in *Blacks and Chicanos in Urban Michigan*, 56-80, and *Life For Us Is What We Make It*.

could work directly with the very pioneers.”<sup>69</sup> Florence Willson Duhn reminisced fondly about her studies:

Well, they were great, wonderful years because Merrill-Palmer allowed you such freedom to experiment—to change—to say what you thought. If they didn’t agree . . . they would tell you so, but if they thought there was some possibility of the thing being better, they would help you work it out. . . . It was a flexible, informal kind of school where you could talk with your superiors—you could discuss your problems with them.<sup>70</sup>

Merrill-Palmer alumnae enjoyed active careers in early childhood education but often retired from paid employment while they raised their own children. Although the School’s administrators and faculty introduced a career-guidance component into the curriculum and designed alumnae-outreach programs to assist their charges in planning their careers, conventional notions of family obligation prevailed.<sup>71</sup> Most married alumnae chose—like Ethel Childs Baker—to keep the peace at home by putting their careers on hold until their children were grown and out of the house. Many, such as Florence Willson, had been trained at home to accept a gendered education and profession and had chosen the child-development field as a way to enter professional life without challenging accepted gender roles too dramatically. She married in 1933, but not before the School awarded her a graduate fellowship in Physical Growth and nurtured her into a child-development expert; she transferred to the nursery school as replacement staff in January 1930 and eventually moved into a leadership position as an instructor.<sup>72</sup> Subsequently Willson Duhn assisted in a series of two-day workshops for emergency nursery school staff in West Virginia before leaving the School in 1942 to raise her children. For such women, their class standing dictated that as middle-class, married mothers they needed to raise their own children and not use day care themselves. Their identities as mothers rather than as wives removed them from professional careers.

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<sup>69</sup> Sanger, interview, ECOHP, 21.

<sup>70</sup> Langlois *Serving Children Then and Now*, 26.

<sup>71</sup> The School opened its Advisory Service for College Women in October 1932 in order to counsel women “in personal, family, and professional problems.” Merrill-Palmer, *Tenth Report*, 51.

<sup>72</sup> Merrill-Palmer School, *Ninth Report, 1929-30 and 1930-31* (Detroit: Merrill-Palmer School, 1931), 18-19.

Although motherhood may have prevented some married women from pursuing a professional career, marital status per se did not influence the selection of graduate students or faculty at Merrill-Palmer. For instance, Mary Frew was shocked when the School admitted her for graduate work even though she had married the very morning of her applicant interview. Frew believed that she had risked losing her spot at the School by informing her interviewer that she was married. But to her “amazement” the School authorities assured her of their eagerness to bring her on board. Frew exclaimed, “I nearly fell over because that was the way it was in the 1930s,” yet she entered Merrill-Palmer in fall 1937 as a graduate assistant in Mental Growth. Frew graduated from the School and left professional life to raise her family, then eventually returned in 1961 as a licensing consultant for the Michigan Department of Social Services.<sup>73</sup>

Merrill-Palmer graduates used their status to lobby intensively for protective childcare legislation in Michigan. Esther Dean Callard became a Professor of Human Development and chair of the Department of Family and Consumer Resources at Wayne State University. She also directed the Detroit/Wayne County Child Care Coordinating Council (4C) and was instrumental in opening a laboratory preschool at the Cass Corridor Unitarian Church in 1947. One of Ethel Childs Baker’s classmates, Sally Brown, became the first paid director of the Detroit/Wayne County 4C in 1972. After her retirement, Brown directed the Council on Early Childhood at the Center for Urban Studies at Wayne State University from 1977 to 1987. As parents of Detroit children, these women were actively engaged in educational innovations such as cooperative nurseries, and they taught their children to value involvement in the community. Callard’s son became the director of the Franklin Street Settlement and the Bakers were proud of their son’s work with the Detroit Urban League. Ann Linn led the move in Detroit to develop cooperative nurseries. After ten years with those groups she joined the Franklin Street staff. Linn recalled about that job that she lost twenty-two pounds in just one year, exclaiming, “It was nice fitting into a size 3, but 22 pounds in eleven months! So I think that they [Franklin Street] were doing a tremendous job and it was really too much for me.”<sup>74</sup> Linn joined Wayne State University and taught in the College of Nursing.

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<sup>73</sup> Mary Frew, interview, ECOHP, as reported in Langlois, *Serving Children Then and Now*, 14-15. Frew studied child psychology at Pennsylvania State University and became interested in nursery school education in 1933. She worked in Penn State’s nursery school for three years before entering graduate school at the University of Iowa. While there, she taught at an experimental nursery school at the Iowa Soldier’s Orphans Home in Davenport, IA.

<sup>74</sup> Linn, interview, ECOHP, 10.

Raised to believe that children benefited from women who devoted their lives to mothering, students at the Merrill-Palmer School overcame pervasive ideas that treated the motivations of wage-earning mothers as suspect. In the process, they began to lobby for quality rather than custodial childcare for these families. Likewise, in noticing that child nurturing took many forms, these alumnae learned to appreciate the wide range of parenting skills found in a culturally diverse city like Detroit. While not the project set forth by Edna Noble White and her faculty, Merrill-Palmer experts learned after World War II to honor a variety of parenting styles and began to incorporate this flexibility into the School's program. Seeking the "preservation of the family," the Merrill-Palmer "experiment" in early childhood education ultimately guided its community to expand the parameters of family, parenting, and child study.

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