

In focus: Early childhood education – time for an ECE revolution

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The pandemic offers the opportunity to transform early childhood education in England to benefit young children and their families, say Claire Cameron and Peter Moss

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

There are deep-seated problems about how young children are educated and looked after in England today; the system of early childhood education (ECE) and care does not work for children or parents, workers or society. Nothing short of transformation is now needed to give these children the all-round upbringing they have a right to and parents the support they need to both work and care.

This is the core message of a new book from UCL Institute of Education – *Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a Democratic Education*. The book is highly critical, detailing the problems in today's early childhood services, but also very hopeful, setting out how tomorrow's transformed services might look.

The problems are deep-seated and well-known. They include a system split between childcare and early education; fragmented services; starting primary school too early; a devalued 'childcare' workforce; a culture of managerial accountability, focused on standardised and measurable outcomes; and a large gap between the end of well-paid leave and entitlement to early childhood education.

Though well-known, these problems have never been fixed since early childhood became a national priority in 1997, successive governments choosing to put sticking plasters on a deeply flawed system rather than conduct a thorough diagnosis and effective course of treatment. Hence our call, even at this late stage, for transformation – by which we mean fundamental change in how we think about, organise and do early childhood education.

A SEAMLESS SYSTEM

Our overriding aim is a public and fully integrated system of early childhood education, extending the current integration of policy-making, administration, curriculum and regulation to integration of access, funding, workforce and type of provision.

This would create a seamless system based on the right to education from birth, a principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and on the recognition that early childhood education is a public good, whose benefits reach beyond the individual users of these services to the wider society.

This system would be:

- available as a right for children from birth to six years and their carers, combined with 12 months of well-paid maternity and parental leave, with at least four months available only for fathers and at least four months only for mothers. This would mean access to various child-and-carer services during the period of leave, with children starting to attend on their own during their second year
- based on a network of fully integrated, multi-purpose and community-based Children's Centres, providing education to all children, plus other services for children and families, and with opening hours that recognise and support parents' employment
- staffed by graduate professionals specialising in work with children from birth to six years, having parity of status and employment conditions with compulsory school teachers, and accounting for at least 60 per cent of staff working directly with children
- recognised as the first stage of education, with primary (and compulsory) education starting at age six, and with comparable standing to other stages in the education system, with which it should develop strong and equal partnerships
- free to attend for a core period, equivalent to normal school hours in the compulsory education sector
- funded directly, not via subsidies paid to parents. Over time, public funding would be withdrawn from the private, for-profit sector to be used exclusively for the public system
- closely connected to local authorities, which would have a rejuvenated role in planning, co-ordination and support, as well as providing Children's Centres along with non-profit private providers. Central government would play a reduced but important strategic role
- built on values of participatory democracy, equality, co-operation and solidarity.

ROOTED IN EDUCATION

What we propose is a system that is rooted in education, an 'early childhood education' with no more talk of 'childcare services' or 'childcare workers'. Which does not mean ignoring the needs of employed parents; they are recognised in generous opening hours and reformed parental leave. Nor is 'care' jettisoned: but rather than 'childcare for working parents', it is presumed that all children (and adults) require care, care being understood as an ethic that defines how children and adults should relate to each other. This is ECE with an ethic of care.

Similarly, this education service is about learning, but also addresses a wide range of other needs presented by local families and communities. It is 'multi-purpose' and 'community-based', building on and building up the innovative work of existing Children's Centres. Last but not least, 'education' is understood as a broad and holistic concept, concerned with fostering and supporting the general well-being and holistic development of children, and their ability to interact effectively with their environment and to live a flourishing life.

CLEAR PRINCIPLES

Such an education needs to be built on clear principles, including:

- participatory democracy, co-operation and listening as core values, informing how to be with and relate to young children
- an image of the 'rich' child born with great potential and a hundred languages – many different ways to express themselves and relate to others
- adopting notions of slow knowledge and slow pedagogy, allowing time to linger, reflect and revisit that leads to deep learning and rich meaning-making
- the importance of context and interpretation, diversity and complexity, uncertainty and the unexpected
- observation and documentation, and in particular pedagogical documentation, having a central role, enabling all learning of all children, in its full diversity and complexity, to become visible and valued
- assessment as a co-operative process embedded in everyday educational experience, part of a democratic, participatory, meaningful accountability
- trust in the agency, capabilities and potentialities of all involved, whether children, practitioners, parents or others.

JUST IMAGINE

We invite readers to imagine how things could be: if there were good local services for all children and families; if they went to such services long enough to become part of an early childhood community; if workers in these services were appropriately qualified, well paid and really valued; if everyone involved, including children, were treated in a respectful way; if there was no gap between the end of well-paid leave and entering the local early childhood service. Is this just fanciful?

Or is such a transformed early childhood education possible? There are enough examples of what we propose, both in England and abroad, to show it is. Many of these appear in the book, including the integrated early childhood education system in Sweden; the graduate early childhood workforces in New Zealand (early years teachers) and Denmark (social pedagogues); the democratic practice of the Modern Education Movement in Portugal; the pedagogical documentation of Reggio Emilia in Italy; and the seamless transition from well-paid parental leave to universal kindergarten in Norway. And, of course, Children's Centres, a brilliant home-grown example with enormous potential.

We know what to do. What is needed is political commitment and policy continuity over a transition period of ten to 15 years during which, for example, the early childhood workforce can be reformed, Children's Centres can become universal provision, and public funding can be focused on these Centres.

RESPONSIVE AND REFLECTIVE

While doubting some of the overblown claims made for early childhood education as a cure-all for society's ills, we firmly believe that such a transformed system of early childhood education – inclusive, equitable, responsive and reflective – would play an important role in the renewed welfare state that recent events have shown to be urgently needed.

Universal Children's Centres would be important elements in a restored social infrastructure providing opportunities and support for all citizens. The system and its Children's Centres would contribute to many important social goals: children's learning and well-being, support for families and communities, promoting gender and other equalities, strengthening inter-generational relations and local democracy.

But not just by themselves; early childhood education is no substitute for strong policies to ensure children and their families have decent incomes, housing, health and food (all subjects tackled in our book). As the experience of the United States shows, early childhood education cannot make good the ravages of inequality, insecurity and other injustices.

RETHINK AND TRANSFORM

Reeling from the shock of Covid-19, England's ramshackle and fragile system of marketised services needs short-term assistance to carry on – no-one wants children, parents and workers left in the lurch by the collapse of private childcare providers. But we must not let this crisis go to waste.

The pandemic has revealed the defects in our current provision for young children and their families; but it also offers the opportunity to rethink and transform, to provide something fundamentally better and stronger.

Now is the time to open up a debate about the state we are in and what we want for our children. We hope that our book, which is available

free online, will stimulate and inform that necessary debate.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: system ^[4]

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