

Now is the time! Confronting neo-liberalism in early childhood ^[1]

Author: Moss, P. & Roberts-Holmes, G.

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The book looks in particular at neo-liberalism's impact in three areas. The first is the global spread of markets in early childhood services and of private, for-profit provision, exemplifying how neo-liberalism economises and commodifies social and cultural institutions. The second is neo-liberalism's imaginary – its images of the young child, the parent, the early childhood centre and the worker in that centre. What emerges is the image of a poor child, deficient and needing to be readied to become, in due course, homo economicus and (a term much in favour today) 'human capital'; the image of the parent as a consumer purchasing care and education in the marketplace; the image of the centre as both a business and a factory, competing in the marketplace and applying technologies to ensure children achieve predefined outcomes; and the worker as a businesswoman and technician. The third is how, under neo-liberalism, early childhood centres, workers and children are increasingly strongly governed through new public management, 'neo-liberalism's governance', with its emphasis on explicit standards and measures of performance, and what Jerry Muller (2018: 4) terms 'metric fixation . . . the seemingly irresistible pressure to measure performance, to publicize it and reward it, often in the face of evidence that this just doesn't work very well'.

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It seems to us that a crisis is occurring – or rather crises. Now is the time for those of us in early childhood who find the influence of neo-liberalism deeply problematic and unpalatable 'to develop alternatives to existing policies', grounding them in ideas that contest neo-liberalism. We need to reimagine early childhood education and care as a public good, a collective endeavour and a right of citizenship. We need to declare new images and new forms of governance that embody values of cooperation, solidarity, trust and democracy. We need to find a new language to think and talk about early childhood, using a new vocabulary. We should not ditch the economic, but put it in its place, as servant not master, and reclaim the importance of the cultural, the social and the political.

And we should undertake this transformative work, this unseating of neo-liberalism from its dominant position in early childhood, in collaboration with others engaged in the same work in other fields, be it elsewhere in education or, more broadly, the economy, the environment, the welfare state, health, democracy or social justice. In short, we should be contributing to the task of envisaging a better world, a more equal, more caring, more democratic, more sustainable world. We have no time to waste, because the politically impossible may be becoming the politically inevitable.

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