

# Critical and hopeful

*Nathan Archer*

## **Early Childhood in the Anglosphere: systemic failings and transformative possibilities**

Peter Moss and Linda Mitchell, London, UCL Press, 2024.

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*Early Childhood in the Anglosphere: systemic failings and transformative possibilities* by Peter Moss and Linda Mitchell is a timely and valuable book. Serving as robust critique and hopeful imaginings of alternative directions, the book takes an international comparative approach to interrogate both flawed national systems and alternative understandings and enactments of early childhood education. Importantly, this insightful and absorbing text offers a pathway beyond the current status quo in the Anglosphere.

Contributing to a growing body of work about the reach and impact of neoliberalism in early childhood education, this writing provides new and meticulous insights highlighting how free market thinking manifests in early childhood policies and practices in a group of English-speaking nations. The Anglosphere model, whilst featuring some differences between nations, is defined by its preoccupation with neoliberal thought. However, beyond economics, neoliberalism is seen as a pervasive, cultural orthodoxy which has created 'a legacy [of] immiseration, alienation and disenchantment' (p201). Such a legacy in early childhood education is perceived as manifesting through the marketisation and the acceleration of privatised provision, a preoccupation with childcare for working parents, inadequate parenting leave and relatively low public funding.

Of these features, the notions of division and fragmentation in the Anglosphere are explored and in particular how 'split systems' of 'childcare' and 'education' are understood, structured, funded and regulated separately. Rather than early childhood education conceptualised and publicly funded as the first stage in a child's educational journey, the dominant Anglosphere discourse of 'childcare' leaves these services 'stranded in no-man's land, stuck in an indeterminate position, with some of the trappings of education yet confined and defined by the carapace of 'childcare'. Lacking parity with schools and teachers, childcare services and childcare workers are 'consigned to an inferior and subservient role in an educational hierarchy' (p62).

The effects of economisation and the 'twin pillars' of marketisation and privatisation of provision are identified, with the latter a product of the former. These pillars, coupled with the commodification of early childhood education, have consequences for equality of access with a market increasingly focused on higher income areas and

the consequence of 'childcare deserts' in lower incomes areas. Additionally, the push for lower costs in this model diminishes the working conditions of educators.

The authors detail how the Anglosphere has come to accept the following as normal and self-evident:

- that these important public services should be provided for profit by businesses competing in a market
- that there are no longer citizens, including young children with a universal right to education, only consumers needing to purchase a commodity of 'childcare'
- that there should be separate 'childcare' services for some children
- that children should be economised and subjected to 'readyfication', where preparing or readying children for the next stage of education becomes a major pedagogical goal
- that people working in these services should be treated as cheap labour, and
- that there is no hope of fundamental change.

The heart of the book explores the Anglosphere in more detail, focusing on seven high-income nations where English is the predominant language: Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada, England, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and the United States. These comprehensive chapters detail both histories and contemporary policy developments, interrogating in detail governance arrangements, funding, access, attendance, regulation and the workforce. In doing so, the authors make more visible not only some of the Anglosphere's failings, but core assumptions that underpin them.

The format of these case studies affords comparative reading across these national summaries, and this is further aided by supplementary online resources in the form of an annex of national profiles of Anglosphere countries, France and Sweden.<sup>1</sup>

In the chapter, 'Beyond the Anglosphere', two alternative early childhood education systems, and two countries, France and Sweden, are highlighted as differing substantially from the countries of the Anglosphere. Notably in Sweden, early childhood is a unified, substantial and universal first stage of the education system, an integrated early childhood education that retains its own unique pedagogical identity, as well as a clear acknowledgement of the inherent importance of care and full-day opening hours for preschools in response to the needs of the great majority of Swedish parents, who are employed or studying. Importantly, and in distinct difference from the Anglophone countries explored, 'structural integration appears to have been matched by conceptual integration' (p117). Drawing on these alternatives, the authors call for a rejection of conceptualising early childhood services as 'childcare' and private businesses selling commodities to parents with demand-side funding; and for reconceptualising them as multi-purpose, education-led public spaces working with an ethics of care. These

services, as a public good, would feature a well-qualified appropriately remunerated workforce. A core offer of services would be complemented by well-paid, individual entitlements to parenting leave.

Perhaps the most compelling chapter of the book is Chapter 8, 'Transforming early childhood education in the Anglosphere'. This final chapter is about alternatives and possibilities at a time of significant and converging crises. Given the depressing recent policy history of the Anglophone countries explored, a sense of fatalism and despair would be understandable. Rather, the authors establish compelling, although challenging, bases for future directions.

I read the concluding chapter of this book as an exercise in *critical hope* which Giroux describes as 'a discourse of critique and social transformation'.<sup>2</sup> Where this book, and specifically this chapter, excel is in moving from robust critique to a treatise altogether more hopeful, necessary and doable. The focus on transformation and real possibilities is a call for priority to be given to:

- an integrated and public early childhood system, with its services reconceptualised as 'early childhood education', an education infused with care and recognised as the first stage of the education system
- a graduate workforce of early childhood teachers, having parity with other teachers
- a universal, multi-purpose and community-based form of early childhood education provision, and
- synergy between well-paid parenting leave and children's entitlement to education.

This is a book about systems, but it is also one that acknowledges the importance of the 'images' created which shape those systems. The authors write about how images matter, and how they matter in a big way. The image of neoliberalism, as Stephen Ball puts it, 'structures our experience of the world – how we understand the way the world works, how we understand ourselves and others, and how we relate to ourselves and others'.<sup>3</sup>

It is the creation and circulation of such images that I find compelling. Much of the research I am drawn to situates the broader philosophical, political and systemic debates alongside individual stories from those with lived experience of working in and accessing early childhood education. As Moss and Mitchell assert: 'The prize for giving birth to the new is immense and will come from creating interconnecting meta- and micro-narratives' (p202). This reminded me of Maxine Greene's perspective of seeing things big and seeing things small.<sup>4</sup> Greene proposes that to see things small entails a view of a system (as if through a telescope) of existing policies and ideologies, whilst to see things big (as if through a microscope) is to perceive the particularities and details of context. With this in mind, *Early Childhood in the Anglosphere* inspires a challenge

to draw on micro-narratives and to put these into dialogue with macro-level systems analysis to further critical thinking, challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, consider alternatives, and expand the menu of what is possible.

The final chapter of the book also calls for an urgent process of public deliberation, with wide participation informed (and provoked) by a comparative, cross-national approach. The proposed result would be a clear vision of and convincing rationale for the transformed system that has been chosen, and a clear process and timeline for making the vision a reality. The authors offer the beginning of a process of transition from the current to the possible enabling a visualisation and steps to enactment. Yet, they are rightly cautious not to prescribe the detail, but offer one proposal for consideration.

I read the critical hope which underpins this book as opening up spaces for dissent, for envisaging democratic alternatives, for making authority accountable and for animating social transformation. This book widens the horizons of comparison by evoking not just different histories in early childhood education but different possible futures.

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## Notes

1. See: [https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10180525/1/Moss\\_ChAnnex%20A.29mar2023.pdf](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10180525/1/Moss_ChAnnex%20A.29mar2023.pdf))
2. Henri Giroux, 'When hope is subversive', *Tikkun*, 19(6), 2004, pp38-9, p38: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/tikkun/article-abstract/19/6/62/99425/When-Hope-is-Subversive>
3. Stephen Ball in the preface to Peter Moss and Guy Roberts-Holmes, *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education: markets, imaginaries and governance*, London, Routledge, 2021, p xv.
4. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: essays on education, the arts and social change*, San Francisco, CA., Jossey-Bess, 1995.