

Now is the time! Confronting neo-liberalism in early childhood

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cie**Peter Moss**  and **Guy Roberts-Holmes** 

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Abstract

Over the last 30 years, neo-liberalism has permeated early childhood, as all other aspects of life. Having introduced what neo-liberalism is, the article looks at some of its effects on early childhood education and care, including markets, imaginaries and governance. It argues that though neo-liberalism is a powerful force, it is resistible and replaceable – and that now is the time to be developing alternatives to existing policies, grounding them in ideas that contest neo-liberalism.

Keywords

alternative policies, contesting, early childhood education and care, neo-liberalism

Over the past 30 years, neo-liberalism has penetrated all aspects of everyday life. Early childhood is no exception. As Margaret Sims (2017: 1) says, neo-liberalism has had ‘a devastating impact on the early childhood sector with its focus on standardisation, push-down curriculum and its positioning of children as investments for future economic productivity’. Yet despite its profound and pervasive presence, for many the term is unknown or meaningless, enabling neo-liberalism to keep a low profile.

Even when broached, people may struggle to see the relevance of neo-liberalism to their lives, including their education and employment. Cristina Vintimilla includes neo-liberalism in the early childhood courses she teaches at a Canadian university, and notes that it can either provoke ‘a tense, awkward moment of silence’ or ‘become a source of contestation’:

A colleague asked me once, ‘Why should one teach neoliberalism in an early childhood degree?’ My students have asked: ‘Why should we bother studying this?’; ‘Why should we bother with neoliberalism when we have to learn how to teach children?’ (Vintimilla, 2014: 79)

What is neo-liberalism? It is an ideology and movement that has been increasingly influential across the world since the 1980s, spreading out from its epicentres in the UK and USA. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were its political standard-bearers, but they were backed by a dense network of influencers – individuals, think tanks, university departments and international organisations. It has achieved a position of dominance not only in areas like the economy and government policy, but

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more insidiously in our language, our understandings, and even our conception of ourselves and others.

At the heart of neo-liberalism is the ‘economisation’ of everything, described by Wendy Brown (2016: 3) as ‘the conversion of non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones extend[ing] market metrics and practices to every dimension of human life; political, cultural, personal, vocational, educational’. Under neo-liberalism, all these domains collapse into the economic, all reducible to economic valuation and transactions. Central to these transactions is the creation of markets where sellers and buyers can be brought together to trade anything and everything, and where neo-liberalism’s prime values of competition, individual choice and calculation can work their supposed magic.

Neo-liberalism not only turns everything into a tradable commodity; it also ‘thoroughly revises what it means to be a human person’ (Mirowski, 2013: 58), calling forth an individual with a very particular subjectivity. This ideal neo-liberal subject is an economic being – *homo economicus*, self-interested and competitive, independent and self-reliant, an informed consumer constantly calculating for every aspect of life what is in her or his best interests. For *homo economicus*, ‘every kind of human activity [is reconfigured] in terms of rational self-investment and entrepreneurship’ (Brown, 2016: 5). She or he must be constantly readying themselves for whatever new twist or turn takes place in the economy and employment, infinitely flexible and responsive to the changing needs of the market, an entrepreneur of the self; as Stephen Ball (2012: 31) says: ‘malleable rather than committed, flexible rather than principled – essentially depthless’.

Much has been written about neo-liberalism’s infiltration of education – sometimes referred to as GERM (the Global Education Reform Movement) – but it has been mostly focused on compulsory and higher education. Less has been written about neo-liberalism and early childhood education and care. This, however, is the subject of a new book (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, forthcoming), which aims to make the presence and effects of this ideology in early childhood more visible and, in doing so, emphasise the significance of the political and economic for this field.

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’.

Underpinning this is a whole way of thinking and talking, expressed through a neo-liberal vocabulary that has permeated early childhood: words like ‘outcomes’ and ‘quality’, ‘testing’ and ‘assessment’, ‘interventions’ and ‘programmes’, ‘evidence-based’ and ‘best practice’, ‘investment’ and ‘human capital’, ‘preparation’ and ‘readiness’. Such words are saturated with particular values and meanings, yet have become taken for granted, used without second thought, a sign of the dominant discourse that neo-liberalism has become.

We should make no mistake – neo-liberalism is a power to be reckoned with, becoming ‘so entrenched in our thinking that for many, there is no alternative: it is simply the way the world

operates' (Sims, 2017: 2). But having acknowledged that, we make two claims. The first is that neo-liberalism is eminently resistible. For instance, in the new book (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, forthcoming), we look at how we can develop the capacity of critical thinking and work to refuse the subjectivities that neo-liberalism would have us assume and accept. We agree with Stephen Ball (2016: 1131) when he argues that '[s]ubjectivity is now a key site of political struggle – not a sufficient site perhaps, but a necessary one . . . it is here also, in “our relation to ourselves”, that we might begin to struggle to think about ourselves differently’ – but also to think differently about the young child, parents, early childhood centres and early childhood workers, refusing neo-liberalism's images in favour of richer, more fulfilling ones.

Our second claim is that neo-liberalism is eventually replaceable. Margaret Thatcher often repeated the neo-liberal motto, 'There is no alternative'. But not only are there alternatives – neo-liberalism itself is now looking distinctly shaky, its legitimacy and credibility undermined by events (in particular the 2008 financial crisis and its grim aftermath); by increasing awareness of its devastating consequences for people, societies and the planet; and by its inability to address the converging crises, environmental and health, confronting our planet and humankind.

The current situation puts us in mind of the words of Milton Friedman, the godfather of neo-liberalism, writing in the 1960s when this ideology was still a minority position. Then, he wrote that:

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (Friedman, 1982: ix)

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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