

Neoliberalism and early childhood education. Markets, imaginaries and governance. GUY ROBERTS-HOLMES & PETER MOSS, 2021, Routledge, 216 pp, £23.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-367-14083-0

This vital book provides an accessible analysis of the role played by neo-liberalism in the reshaping of early childhood education (ECE) over the last 40 years. Utilising multiple sources of evidence, the authors provide a critical and persuasive account of how international actors have framed the world in purely economic terms, and explored the consequences of this in the form of centralised policy interventions, marketisation and performativity. As the world emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic, these arguments are more important than ever, as we increasingly pose questions about the future world we wish to inhabit.

The early chapters address the wider context; what is neo-liberalism, where has it come from and what values and beliefs does it hold? Drawing on critiques of human capital theory, the authors position neo-liberalism as pervasive yet opaque, borrowing Monbiot's argument that it is so intertwined in our lives 'we cannot stand far enough back to see it' (Monbiot, 2017: 29). Chapter two turns to education, highlighting Sahlberg's concept of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) as a way of explaining how policy technologies drive the neo-liberal agendas of managerialism, marketisation and standardisation. In particular, the authors argue that neo-liberalism has taken root in compulsory education systems through a network of global actors, including business corporations and non-governmental organisations, to create a hegemonic common-sense view of what education is for. Here is the core of the book's central argument; that neo-liberalism is a negative force which has impoverished those who work in, and experience, education.

The central chapters address how neo-liberalism has shaped ECE provision internationally, through a focus on markets, developmentalism and governance. A wide range of compelling evidence is used to argue that the commodification of care leads to ECE provision being both less equal and of poorer quality, and the book goes some way in unpicking the contradictory rhetoric first espoused by New Labour that we can have provision which is simultaneously cheaper and better by arguing that the market has failed to eliminate disadvantage. Personally, the most compelling sections are when the book moves away from contextual facts and figures and foregrounds the human experiences of ECE under neo-liberalism, particularly how the image of the child has shifted from a confident meaning-maker, to a neo-liberal framing of the child as an empty vessel, to be converted into the 'right kind of worker' (p96). Whilst a book of this size cannot hope to cover everything, further feminist and

Marxist perspectives would also be appropriate here in so far as neo-liberalism arguably fuels its economic aims for ECE through the exploitation of working-class women as cheap labour. The book concludes by offering messages of hope and resistance on which Moss has been writing for many years. Drawing on the work of Ball, and in particular, Foucault, the authors describe the need for a form of critical activism, not only questioning and reframing who we are but also organising to actively resist the policies and practices of neo-liberal reform. Whilst laudable, I am not sure I share the authors' optimism; one of the examples of resistance given was the battle over Reception Baseline Assessment; whilst true that the government initially retreated, it has simply been repackaged and is now a statutory requirement. However, it is to the authors' credit that they don't succumb to fatalism, as whilst they pull no punches about the scale of the challenge, they provide clear ideas for how we can reframe ECE around the principles of democracy, social justice and environmentalism. They also argue in the postscript that neo-liberalism, which was already under threat, has been further undermined by Covid. I can only hope they are right.

In summary, this book is essential reading for all those interested in early childhood, including academics, students, ECE professionals and parents. It provides a coherent argument for how political ideology shapes our education system and ultimately poses questions about what ECE is for, and importantly, how it can be seen as a mirror of wider society; the one we have, and the one we would like to build.

Reference

Monbiot, G (2017) *Out of the wreckage: A new politics for an age of crisis*. London: Verso

Word count: 676

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