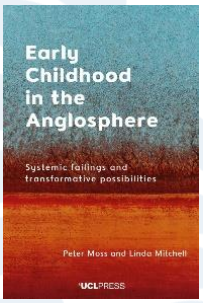
Book Review

Early Childhood in the Anglosphere:

Systemic Failings and Transformative Possibilities



Reviewer: Jessica Smith

A review of *Early childhood in the Anglosphere: Systemic failings and transformative possibilities*, by Peter Moss and Linda Mitchell (2024). UCL Press.
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As an Early Childhood Education (ECE) kaiako, a PhD student, and an advocate for quality in education, I found *Early Childhood in the Anglosphere: Systemic Failings and Transformative Possibilities* an informative addition to the recent literature on neoliberal reform and early education policy and practice. This book has some practical suggestions for transformative change at the policy level in the early childhood education (ECE) sector in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond. Given what many believe is a current sector wide crisis, Moss and Mitchell provide a timely commentary on actions the government should be taking if we hope to achieve a "fully integrated public early education system" (p. 194) in Aotearoa.

As a self-proclaimed history enthusiast, I am sympathetic to the way Moss and Mitchell examine the longer-term systemic issues in ECE—content which is a good starting point for students, researchers or advocates who want to understand more about the evolution of the ECE sector. The development of the New Zealand ECE sector is situated in relation to the wider trends in the Anglosphere, allowing us to see common ideologies which intersect internationally. (The "Anglosphere" is a term used to refer to a collective of English-dominant speaking countries with shared or similar historical and cultural heritage.)

Moss and Mitchell begin by exploring systemic issues in the ECE sectors across seven English-dominant speaking countries—the Anglosphere of Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, England, Ireland, Scotland, United States of America, and Canada. The authors highlight the common ECE system failures across the Anglosphere, including: the narrative of childcare (as oppositional to or separated from education); privatisation and marketisation of the sector; shortfall in government funding; undervaluing of the

ECE workforce; and the disconnect between parental leave provisions and funding for free ECE. While this book examines the similarities between the countries, the examples that I will draw on focus on Aotearoa New Zealand.

The authors are unapologetic about their criticism of the impact of neoliberalism on the ECE sectors across the Anglosphere. Like myself, I'm sure other kaiako are not quite sure what the term neoliberalism means, but from further reading I found that it relates to the spread of market logic, competition and the dominance of profit driven decisions. This is widely seen in the New Zealand context with large numbers of private for-profit ECE centres that dominate the ECE sector. However, neoliberalism extends deeper than this, into the everyday practice of ECE. For example, Sims (2017) notes that neoliberalism 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" (p. 1).

One of the major problems in the Anglosphere is the privatisation and marketisation of the ECE sectors. Joining the chorus of recent work which has drawn attention to the way extensive marketisation undermines quality ECE over time, the authors highlight the tensions in commodifying ECE. While there are some examples of well-functioning markets, the approach adopted across the Anglosphere has allowed for the expansion of new, more corporatised ECE business models to emerge, many backed by international equity funds. Although a relatively small ECE market, even New Zealand has experienced these trends, with the recent acquisition of Provincial Education by global ECE giant Busy Bees in 2021 (Morton, 2021).

Part of the reason for the political allowance of ECE to become privatised to this extent relates to the discursive understanding of what ECE is. A central argument of the book is the dominating discourse of childcare over early education within the Anglosphere. While Aotearoa New Zealand has a stronger early childhood *education* discourse than many other countries, the notion of childcare still has wide purchase. One recent example of this in the 2023 election was the new "Family Boost childcare tax credit," pitched to voters as a tax rebate for *childcare* costs (New Zealand National Party, 2023). Moss and Mitchell emphasise the need for a shift in the discourse to emphasise education. Historically, notions of childcare have been linked to ideas of women's work, characterised by low pay and undervaluing of the skills and expertise that ECE teachers have. While care is still an important aspect of this rhetoric, care can be referred to as an "ethics of care" to guide how to relate to others rather than the definition of a service that is being sold to parents.

Positioning ECE not as a key part of the education system, but as childcare, has justified the relatively low levels of public funding and general undervaluation by governments in Anglophone contexts. Despite increased funding for early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand over the past 15 years, the demand-driven model has intensified competition and marketisation in the sector, as centres seek to enrol more children to secure larger funding allocations. In England and Scotland public funding is paid directly to families, while in Australia, Ireland and New Zealand the funding is paid directly to the ECE services, but services can still choose what fees to charge on top of this and funding is only tenuously linked to staff wages and quality indicators.

Moving out from the ECE sector into wider family policy concerns, the final systemic failing that the authors highlight is the disconnect between the amount of well-paid parental leave and entitlement for children to attend an ECE service. The amount of parental leave across the seven countries varies, ranging from 12 weeks unpaid leave in the USA to 24 months in Australia, where 26 weeks of that is paid leave. However, other than 6 weeks in the UK, none of this parental leave is well paid. This disconnect can be seen in New Zealand, where a parent can take up to a year of extended parental leave, but the 20 hours of free ECE does not begin until the child is 3 years old. This leaves working parents to cover potentially two years of some of the highest ECE costs in the OECD for their children to attend a service (OECD, 2024).

While the outlook for ECE sectors in the Anglosphere seems alarming, Moss and Mitchell take a hopeful approach for the future. Aotearoa New Zealand has already been working towards transformational changes over the past 40 years, such as the educational reforms in the 80s and 90s, including the introduction of a three-year teaching degree; the development of a bicultural curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017); movement towards pay parity with the compulsory sector; and more recently, the Early Learning Action Plan 2019–2029 (Ministry of Education, 2019).

Moss and Mitchell's aspirations for transformative changes are aspirations that I think all of us have for the future of the sector. This is summed up nicely as an integrated and public early childhood education system, infused with ethics of care and supported by early childhood teachers who are recognised and valued in the same ways as teachers from other sectors. The authors have hopes for a universal and community-based form of early childhood provision, and a synergy between well-paid parental leave and young children's entitlement to a free education.

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