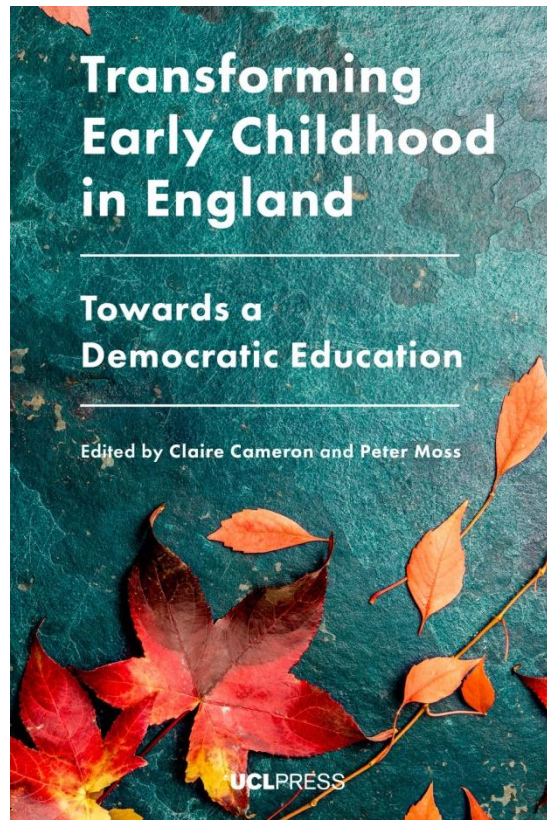


Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a democratic education'

Edited by Claire Cameron and Peter Moss; published by UCL Press



Briefing

There are deep-seated problems about the ways in which preschool aged children are looked after and educated in England today; the system of early childhood education and care does not work for children or parents, workers or society. This book both outlines the problems and sets out solutions, offering tangible hope for the future. In the analysis of the authors, all academics working at or associated with the UCL Institute of Education, nothing short of transformation is now needed to give young children the all-round upbringing they have a right to and parents the support they need to both work and care. Drawing on examples from home and abroad, the authors set out clearly what this would mean.

The need for transformative change

Deepening inequalities in England today mean that many young children live in very difficult circumstances, with inadequate food, health and housing: 'the welfare state has become threadbare, failing to prevent the lives of many young children and families from being blighted by poverty, insecurity, poor housing and homelessness'. Children and families are

also failed by an early childhood education and care system that has consistently failed to face up to deep-seated problems and to explore alternatives - successive governments have tinkered when transformative change is called for.

Across 14 chapters examining different aspects of early childhood education and care in England, the book documents the need for transformative change. Endemic problems include:

- a system that remains **split** between childcare and early education, creating inequalities, divisions and discontinuities. Despite initial progress post-1997, integration of the system stalled before tackling the 'wicked' issues of access, funding, workforce and provision
- a 'hotch-potch' of **fragmented services**, different types provided for different purposes and different families. The network of Children's Centres, which might have provided a unified and universal service, has been hollowed out by years of austerity.
- a persistent and **damaging focus on 'childcare'** instead of 'education', with a failure to understand that 'care' should be part of *all* services for *all* children, irrespective of their parents' employment status, and that all early childhood services (including schools) should as a matter of course recognise the needs of employed parents
- entry to primary school at **too young** an age, not good for children and creating a truncated and weakened early years sector
- a split and **devalued workforce**, overwhelmingly female, mostly consisting of 'childcare workers' with low status and qualification and wages so poor that many depend on welfare benefits.
- reliance on a **childcare market** dominated by **private, for-profit** services – England has the most marketised and privatised ECEC system in Europe, with consequent systemic failures
- a **standardised, one-size-fits-all curriculum** that is narrowly focused on preparing children for primary school at the expense of diversity and context; with a pedagogy that is measurement-driven and fails to recognise or value many subtle and fleeting signs of learning that are difficult to measure easily
- a **culture of managerial accountability**, with a narrow and prescriptive approach focused on standardised and measurable outcomes. Observation and documentation are used as tools of measurement and standardisation, rather than as productive ways for trusted and reflective staff to value individual children's capabilities and interests; 'there is no room for the unexpected because it does not fit the predefined script. But engaging with young children is full of the unexpected'.
- a pervasive **democratic deficit**, with democracy absent as a stated value, as a daily practice, and as a means of governing the system and individual services. There is no democratic accountability to local communities, as the role of elected local authorities has withered away.
- a **lack of synergy** between policies, in particular between early childhood services and parenting leaves, with a large gap between the end of well-paid leave and an entitlement to attend an early childhood service. Leave policy itself, like ECEC, is flawed and dysfunctional.

Towards transformative change

The book argues that political choices are needed to create transformative change. As a society, we have to address such questions as: 'What is our image of the child?', 'What is early childhood education for?', 'What are the fundamental values of early childhood education?', 'What is our image of the early childhood centre?', and 'What do we want for our children?' In answering these questions, the authors draw heavily on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the right of the child to education beginning at birth.

Proposals for transformative change include:

- Creating a **public system** of early childhood education that is **fully integrated**, covering policy-making, administration, curriculum, regulation, access, funding, workforce, type of provision, and underpinned by an integrative concept, a broad concept of education working with an ethics of care.
- The integrated public system would be
 - available as of **right for children** from birth to 6 years and their carers, combined with 12 months of well-paid maternity and parental leave, with at least 4 months available only for fathers and at least 4 months only for mothers. This would mean access to various child-and-carer services during the period of leave, with children starting to attend on their own during their second year
 - based on a network of fully integrated, multi-purpose and community-based **Children's Centres**, providing education to all children plus other services for children and families, and with opening hours that recognise parents' employment
 - staffed by **graduate professionals** specialising in work with children from birth to 6 years, having parity of status and conditions with compulsory schoolteachers, and accounting for at least 60 per cent of staff working directly with children
 - recognised as the first stage of the education system, with primary (and compulsory) education **starting at age 6**, and with comparable standing to other stages in the education system with which it should develop strong and equal partnerships
 - **free to attend** for a core period, equivalent to normal school hours in the compulsory education sector
 - **funded directly**, not via subsidies paid to parents. Over time, public funding would be withdrawn from the private, for-profit sector to be used exclusively for the public system
 - closely connected to **local authorities**, who would have a rejuvenated role in planning, coordination and support as well as providing some Children's Centres, alongside non-profit private providers. Central government would play a reduced but important strategic role.
 - built on **values** of participatory democracy, cooperation and solidarity.

Transformative change requires attention to pedagogical as well as structural values and principles. In the transformed system of early childhood education, these include:

- participatory democracy, cooperation and listening as core **values**, informing how to be with and relate to young children, and an **image of the 'rich' child** born with great

potential and a hundred languages – many different ways to express themselves and relate to others.

- adopting notions of **slow** knowledge and slow thinking and slow pedagogy, allowing time to linger, reflect, revisit, and leading to deep learning and rich meaning-making
- the importance of **context** and **interpretation, diversity** and **complexity, uncertainty** and the **unexpected**
- **observation and documentation**, and in particular pedagogical documentation, playing a central role, enabling all learning of all children, in its full diversity and complexity, to become visible and valued
- **assessment as a cooperative and dynamic process** embedded in everyday educational experience, turning away from the current demand for managerial accounting and towards a democratic, participatory and meaningful accountability
- **trust** in and **respect** for the agency, capabilities and potentialities of all involved, whether children, practitioners, parents or others.

Lastly, the book discusses how this transformation might take place, including a transition period of upto 15 years, continuity of policy, and a single 'early childhood fund'. The proposed transformation, it is argued, is utopian - but it is a *real* utopia that is desirable, viable and achievable.

Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a democratic education, edited by Claire Cameron and Peter Moss, is published by UCL Press. It is available free as an open access book at <https://www.ft.com/content/273f9f99-0ff6-4859-8ed0-b9f580450b5e>. Hardback and paperback versions are also available for £45 and £25 respectively.

Note on authors and contents

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