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## EDUCATION POLICY | REVIEW ARTICLE

# Neoliberalism and early childhood

Margaret Sims<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** Over 30 years ago, Freire warned of the dangers of neoliberalism and Chomsky today sees this as the greatest threat to democracy. Education is particularly targeted by the neoliberal state because potentially, as educators, we can teach children to think critically, and as adults, critical thinkers are positioned as problems, not resources. Neoliberalism has 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. Conversely, the growing push for professionalisation of early childhood creates demands for discretionary decision-making that is in tension with the top-down compliance requirements of neoliberalism. In this paper, I present the ways in which neoliberalism impacts the early childhood sector, and call for early childhood professionals to engage in active resistance. Active resistance can take different forms and I discuss some of these. As educators, we have an obligation to both think and act critically and fight for a world where democracy flourishes and where all children have equal opportunities to participate, to shine and to be happy; thus, I argue we have a responsibility to resist the key impacts of neoliberalism.

**Subjects:** Childhood; Early Years; Education Policy & Politics

**Keywords:** early childhood; leadership; neoliberalism; resistance



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Sims is a professor of Early Childhood at the University of New England, Australia. Her research interests focus around quality community-based services for children and families, and she has a particular interest in working with infants and toddlers and integrated early childhood service delivery (areas in which she has published texts as well as research papers). She is currently engaged in an international study of the ways in which early childhood is professionalising and this includes a study on leadership in early childhood. This paper arises from a synthesis of these research projects along with the writing she undertakes for the local community newspaper.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In democracies, education is supposed to be the tool enabling children, irrespective of their family background, to succeed in life, to overcome disadvantage and grow to be valued and contributing citizens. However, under neoliberalism, education has changed and now the capacity of teachers to shape children's critical thinking is strictly limited; what is valued has increasingly become compliant employees who have the skills and knowledge to perform the job required without asking questions. Key critics of neoliberalism (e.g. Chomsky) position this as the largest threat to democracy we have ever faced. In this paper, I review these arguments and show how they are played out in the early childhood sector. I argue that as early childhood professionals, we have a responsibility to resist these pressures, and fight for our sector to develop in a different way, a way that ensures each child experiences learning opportunities that enable them to flourish.

## 1. Education and neoliberalism

Over 30 years ago, Paulo Freire (1973) warned that we are becoming dehumanised through an “unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed” (p 26). This dehumanising oppression is more and more evident and Noam Chomsky, one of the pre-eminent thinkers of the world today, warns: “As long as the general population is passive, apathetic, and diverted to consumerism or hatred of the vulnerable, then the powerful can do as they please, and those who survive will be left to contemplate the outcome” (Chomsky, 2016, p. 56). Freire and Chomsky are referring to the ideology underpinning neoliberalism, an ideology evident in countries cross Europe, America and the Pacific (including Australia and New Zealand).

What does this mean for education, and in particular early childhood education? What role do we, as educators, play in contributing to this oppression, or conversely, challenging it? In this paper, I will review the critiques of neoliberalism in education today and show how these are enacted in early childhood education. Given that we are now very much aware of the importance of the early years in shaping children’s brains and contributing towards long-term outcomes (for example, see Heckman, 2014; Save Childhood Movement, 2014; UNICEF Early Childhood Development Unit, 2014), it is vitally important for early childhood educators to be reflective and critical in the work that they do with young children; to be sure that what they are doing is laying appropriate foundations from which will arise citizens with a commitment to “the fundamental principles of justice and freedom that lie at the heart of a robust democracy” (Giroux, 2015, p. 12).

Neoliberalism has become so entrenched in our thinking that for many, there is no alternative: it is simply the way the world operates (Davies & Bansel, 2007; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004). Abendroth and Portfilio (2015, p. xii) define neoliberalism as an “anti-democratic force that gives the corporate elite of global capitalism power of nation states”. Growing from its beginning after the end of the Second World War, neoliberalism has resulted in concentrating wealth and power into the top 1% of the elite who use that power to create an economic system that maintains their power (Chomsky, 2016). At the same time, wages for the majority have remained low, workloads have increased and artificial bubbles of paper wealth are created which disappear quickly, leaving many people in much worse financial positions whilst those who created these bubbles are bailed out by the taxpayer and maintain their wealth and status.

At its core, neoliberalism focuses on standardisation and accountability: there is an assumption that quality is best ensured by top-down regulations and compliance monitoring (Baltodana, 2012). The market is the ultimate test: a business that survives and grows is one that has rigid quality control mechanisms that persuade the buyer that the product will always look the same, and work exactly as it is supposed to (Peters, 2012).

Chomsky’s view is clear: “The impact of the neoliberal programs of the past generation almost everywhere has been to undermine democratic participation, to impose stagnation or sometimes decline on the majority of the population and to concentrate wealth very narrowly, which of course then in turn affects the political system and how it works” (Srinivasan, 2016). However, not all agree. In a recent blog, Michael Keating (2017) argues that it is both conjecture and unproven that neoliberalism has had an impact on growth in individualism and that, in assigning the cause of societal changes in areas such as increasing inequality, we are using the neoliberal ideology as a scapegoat. Keating, for example, attributes increases in inequality to growth in technology and globalisation. It is not the purpose of this article to unpack the complex arguments identified here, but rather to examine the changes occurring as they relate to early childhood education.

Neoliberal thinking as identified by Chomsky does not translate easily into social services, and in particular education. In creating an education system where education is a product just like any other product, there arises conflict around who is the ultimate consumer of education: Is it the students themselves, their families or the employers who will ultimately provide jobs for graduates? In the neoliberal world, the answer lies squarely with the employers. The aim of schooling has become, as

Henry Giroux (2015) suggests, to create employable graduates through a “pedagogy of ignorance whose hidden curriculum is the teaching of political and intellectual conformity” (p. 15). Employers want employees who will do the job, and only the job, not ask questions, and show respect for their authority (Pucci, 2015). Thinking is no longer valued and students are taught to become “job-ready zombies” (Hil, 2015, p. 5) who have been educated through a “relentless emphasis on job readiness and career. Any sense of a broader, more civically engaged education, grounded in less instrumental values, is crowded out by a focus on industry-relevant skills or, in the current vernacular, ‘graduate attributes’” (Hil, 2015, p. 3). Many industry bodies are now part of external accreditation agencies whose role it is to determine, and police, course content and corporate executives make up the majority of school, university and accrediting agency Boards/Councils/Senates (Baltodana, 2012) imposing their neoliberal managerialism on the sector. The purpose of education has thus become the preparation of students to “enter a neoliberal world of hyper-functionality that ultimately privileges work and economy over the more mundane wonders of human life” (Baltodana, 2012, p. 4).

Once the purpose of education was very different: to prepare citizens to live in, and participate in, a world where freedom, tolerance, debate and social justice were valued. Now those who criticise the state are positioned as dissidents, freedom of speech is increasingly limited and “the punishing state is a dire threat to both public and higher education and democracy itself” (Giroux, 2015, p. 115). Freedom of speech, once considered the bastion of education, is now positioned as one of the greatest threats to the state, resulting in increasing compliance enforcement throughout the education sector, to the point where “the cultural climate that prevails in higher education is far less hospitable to the ideals of freedom, tolerance and debate than the world outside the university gate” (Furedi, 2017, p. vi). For example, it is now common practice in a number of nations to provide university students with trigger warnings, warnings that some content provided in the course may cause them to feel upset (Furedi, 2017). Such practices make it more difficult for university students to be challenged with big ideas, and legitimise a refusal to engage in debate and thus learn the skills of justifying a position; rather, what is politically correct is seen as the only opinion that should be held and this position no longer needs to be justified, it is considered self-evident (American Association of University Professors, 2014).

As a result, curriculum has become “increasingly vocationalised, and is now viewed in terms of human capital formations, rather than as a way of developing an informed national citizenry” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011, p. 12). Student learning is increasingly measured by standardised tests, and in many schools teaching and learning have been reduced to what is measured on these standardised tests. Learning the accepted knowledge becomes the key requirement of education and this knowledge is becoming increasingly standardised so that knowledge and meaning are homogenised (Giroux, 2015) and “critical thinking as a mode of reasoning is nearing extinction in both the wider society and the sphere of public school education” (Giroux, 2015 p. 43). This leads to what Alvesson and Spicer (2016) call functional stupidity. To illustrate their point, they cite the experience of Nokia. In response to the threat posed by Microsoft and the iPhone, Nokia senior management invested significant resources into the development of a new mobile platform that the majority of middle management knew would not work, but were not able to communicate this because of the strong focus on compliance and their fear that, in dissent, they risked their jobs. Giroux (2015, p. 46) argues this kind of “‘nonthinking’ is the real peril, in that it allows tyranny to take root” resulting in quickening the “transition into authoritarianism” (Giroux 2015, p. 47). President Obama referred to much the same point in a recent press conference where, referring to the fake information in the recent US presidential elections, he said: “If we are not serious about facts and what’s true and what’s not, if we can’t discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems” (<https://thehill.com/policy/technology/306595-obama-rails-against-fake-news>).

## 2. Implications for the early childhood sector

How does this play out in the early childhood sector? Firstly, many nations are now developing early childhood curricula. In the case of Australia, learning outcomes for children from birth are identified (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations, 2009) and early childhood

organisations are required to undergo an accreditation process which, amongst other things, identifies how they are working towards achieving those outcomes (Sims, Mulhearn, Grieshaber, & Sumsion, 2015). The developers of this curriculum framework had no intentions for it to be used as a prescriptive recipe given their positioning of the framework as a tool which should “invigorate discussion and debate about alternative visions and course of action, and offer ways of exploring spaces between the possible and not (yet) possible” (Sumsion & Grieshaber, 2012, p. 241); however, it appears that it is indeed being used in such a manner (Waniganayake & Sims, *in press*). Lack of professional confidence in discretionary decision-making appears to increase the compliance behaviour of those enacting the framework (Cumming, Sumsion, & Wong, 2013; Sims, Waniganayake, & Hadley, 2017). There is always a risk that a curriculum becomes a recipe, leading to the kinds of teaching and learning behaviours that we see in “teaching to the test”. In the Australian context, this appears to be happening, meaning that learning outcomes not easily matched to those identified in the framework are not valued, perhaps ignored and perhaps not addressed. This leads to homogenisation of knowledge as identified by Giroux above, so that ultimately we create a situation where children enter school with a standardised set of knowledge/skills, the kind of knowledge examined in national Australian tests such as the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC - <https://www.aedc.gov.au/>) and the National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN - <https://www.nap.edu.au/naplan>).

Part of this standardisation of knowledge is reflected in concerns around the push-down curriculum, where academic subjects normally associated with the school years are increasingly being imposed on the early childhood sector (Sims, 2014). In Australia, for example, early childhood teachers are accredited under the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards NSW [BOSTES], 2011) which require them to “develop students’ literacy and numeracy within their subject areas” ([BOSTES], 2011, p. 5). The world-renowned New Zealand early childhood framework, Te Whāriki, has come under criticism because it is claimed that there is not sufficient guidance provided to assist early childhood professionals to adequately address children’s literacy and numeracy learning (McLachlan & Arrow, 2011; McLachlan, Nicholson, Fielding-Barnsley, Mercer, & Ohi, 2012). In the Nordic countries, this push-down curriculum is placing more emphasis on school academics than on the egalitarianism that was a key feature of education in the past (Otterstad & Braathe, 2016). Such moves, which prioritise academics related to long-term employability over principles of fairness and social justice, are identified by many (for example, Chomsky, 2013; Furedi, 2017; Giroux, 2013) as one of the major threats of neoliberalism.

The neoliberal focus of preparing children for school and then for employment operates in contrast to the long established early childhood practice of operating from children’s strengths (Brown, 2015). This places children’s learning as an investment in the labour market of the future (Moss et al., 2016; Simpson, Lumsden, & McDowall Clark, 2015), a position arising from the earlier work of economist James Heckman who argued that investing in children as early as possible provided significant long-term benefits for the nation (Heckman, 1998, 2011, 2014). The message is clear:

Education and human skill are major factors determining productivity, both in the workplace and in society. The family is a major producer of the skills and motivation required for producing successful students and workers. The most effective policy for improving the performance of schools is supplementing the childrearing resources of the disadvantaged families sending children to the schools. (Heckman & Masterov, 2007, p. 448)

These arguments are powerful and often used to justify calls for more investment in early childhood (for example, in the Canadian context, the influential report of McCain, Mustard, and Shanker, (2007) was used to drive considerable policy change at the time). However, this approach positions the underlying cause of inequality as the fault of children and families who have failed to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. In this world view, intervention is targeted at “failing” children and families (often defined as “at risk”), thus does not address the ongoing systemic issues that create and maintain disadvantage. This defines the early childhood professional role as

responsible for working directly with children. Application of this is evident in recent Australian research, for example, where early childhood leaders tended to focus their efforts within their own services and were less likely to engage in wider community advocacy, a role in which traditionally many leaders had been active in the past (Fleet, Soper, Semann, & Madden, 2015; Waniganayake & Sims, *in press*).

An inward looking focus, examining practice inside their own organisations and not looking outside, seems to have developed as part of the new role of educational leader in Australia (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015; Waniganayake & Sims, *in press*). Our research suggests that leaders, operating in a context of uncertainty and questionable lines of authority, are focusing their effort on compliance with the EYLF and the National Quality Standard (Sims et al., 2017). This compliance (Ishimine, Tayler, & Thorpe, 2009; call this following the rules) is fostered by increasing levels of surveillance, surveillance designed to assure external body early childhood professionals are doing things right rather than relying on their professional judgement to do the right thing (Cook, Corr, & Breitreuz, 2016). Increasing imposition of externally monitored standards has acted to de-professionalise early childhood educators (Jovanovic & Fane, 2016; Sims, Forrest, Semann, & Slattey, 2014), removing the discretionary decision-making power that is a fundamental element of professionalism. This has the effect of limiting professional practice to that which is “officially spoken about and recognised” (Skattebol, Adamson, & Woodrow, 2016, p. 119) so that teaching is more and more a technical exercise and education is becoming a technocratic profession (Goodson, 2007).

The neoliberal agenda plays out in different ways across the early childhood sectors in different countries: Paananen, Lipponen, and Kumpulainen (2015) call this hybridisation. In the Finnish context, where these authors work, the previous social democratic ideals which informed early childhood practice are slowly being altered by hegemonic neoliberalism, so that the sector is now positioned as addressing an economic imperative (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014; Onnismaa & Kalliala, 2010). In New Zealand, Te Whāriki, influenced by Māori ways of knowing and learning, is now operating in a context of tension between post-colonialism and neoliberalism. For example, from New Zealand, Stover (2013) writes about increasing surveillance based on the positioning of children as investments. Similar tensions operate across a number of Pacific nations (Sims & Tausere-Tiko, 2016). In contrast, early childhood services are developing in Bhutan following a different pattern of hybridisation: one mixing neoliberalism and the spiritual values of Buddhism which underpins Gross National Happiness (Sims & Pedey, 2015). Despite this, the key impacts of neoliberalism, the push-down curriculum, the preparation of children for school (and ultimately employment) and the perception of children as investments, are all evident in Bhutan as they are in the nations of the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia.

### 3. Resistance – whose responsibility?

Giroux (2015) and Chomsky (2016) position neoliberalism as the greatest threat to democracy we have ever faced and argue that we now live in an autocratic world where the role of education is to produce ignorance which operates as “a political weapon that benefits the powerful” (Giroux, 2015, p. 184). Giroux makes the argument that education plays “a crucial, but far from straightforward, role in reproducing the culture of ignorance and instrumental rationality” (Giroux, 2015, p. 44).

Given the role of education in shaping both thinking and behaviour, education professionals clearly have a crucial role in leading resistance. As educators, we have a responsibility: Chomsky (2016, p. 21) argues that as intellectuals we “are typically privileged; privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities. An individual has choices”.

What does that mean for early childhood educators? Some argue that simply surviving and continuing to offer a service is a form of resistance (Springer, 2010) but I, along with Chomsky, argue that coping is not sufficient: we have an obligation to engage more actively in resistance. Tesar (2014) suggests that disturbing the balance of power is a key element in resistance: this involves putting forward new ideas, new ways of looking at things and asking difficult questions. In early

childhood, these can take place as part of professional (critical) conversations (Timperley, 2015) and “[W]hile it is true that critical thinking will not in and of itself change the nature of existing society, engaging in an intellectual struggle with the death-driven rationality that now fuels neoliberal capitalism will set the foundation for producing generations of young people who might launch a larger social movement” (Giroux, 2015, p. 46). Genuine democracy does not exist without space for opposition: “resistance is not a luxury but a necessity” (Giroux, 2015, p. 200). In our research (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015; Sims et al., 2017), we have focused on the important role Australian educational leaders play in supporting early childhood educators to engage in these professional conversations. There is no doubt that educational leaders, responsible for the translation of policy into practice, have the potential to engage in courageous leadership where they act to address inequity and injustice (Waniganayake & Sims, *in press*). In their work supporting educators, they can use the core business of supporting children’s learning to focus attention on each individual child, the child’s context, strengths and interests in a way that encourages educators to create individualised learning opportunities that may, or may not be valued, or even identified, in the official early childhood curriculum. In taking up this role (moving beyond compliance), educational leaders begin to function as leadership connoisseurs (as defined by English & Ehrich, 2016). Leadership connoisseurs see and understand the world differently: using their knowledge and experience to engage in deep reflection and, through their growth, learn to “lead beautifully” (English & Ehrich, 2016, book title). Giroux (2015) reminds us that:

Ideas not only challenge the normalizing discourses and representations of common sense and the power inequities they legitimate, but also open up the possibilities inherent in a discourse that moves beyond the given and points to new ways of thinking and acting about freedom, civic courage, social responsibility, and justice from the standpoint of radical democratic ideals. (p. 189)

In more simple terms, educational leaders can focus professional conversations around the rights of each individual child and family and only when they have determined the most appropriate actions to support those rights should they identify how these choices meet the required learning outcomes in the EYLF/the required curriculum for their country (a process explained more fully in Sims, 2011, 2015). Writing from the UK context, Lynn Ang calls this negotiating pedagogical spaces (Ang, 2014). Educational leaders can become actively engaged in the communities in which they work so they connect with families and other professionals outside of the service environment. They can take up causes addressing issues of social justice in these communities, and involve families and children from their service. They can work with families on these issues, harnessing not only their own expertise, but the knowledge and skills of families. They can actively support educators to spend time in other services, particularly services doing things differently than their service: services with different families and services following different educational philosophies for example. They can encourage educators to attend conferences/workshops/seminars and provide space for professional conversations about what was learned and what this learning might mean for how they do things in their service.

Educational leaders are supported in this work by the building demand to professionalise early childhood, becoming evident across many countries (Bradbury, 2012; Brooker, 2016; Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Gibbons & Farquhar, 2014; Hordern, 2016; Rauschenbach & Riedel, 2015). Professionalisation requires an acceptance of discretionary decision-making: the assumption is that professionals work in a complex environment in which standardised responses are not appropriate, therefore they need to make complex decisions based on a deep understanding. In this sense, professionals act rather like Michael Lipsky’s (2010) street-level bureaucrats; they make decisions based on policy, their knowledge and previous experiences. In this, professionals operate in tension with the neoliberal positioning of them as enforcers of the standards set by the state. Research undertaken by Tony Evans (2011) in the UK illustrates this tension between professionalism and the standardisation required by neoliberalism. In this research, a shared identity and shared disciplinary roots as social workers assisted these professionals to communicate their disagreement with some of the standardised requirements they were expected to follow. Thus, it appears that the discretionary

decision-making that comes with professionalisation may help educators challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism and create space for contextual challenges to standardisation.

The responsibility to resist neoliberalism does not rest only on the shoulders of leaders. We are all responsible for our professional actions and followers can have just as important an impact as leaders (Martin, 2015); Ricketson (2008) calls this courageous followership. More recently, Alvesson and Spicer (2016, p. 217) suggest a range of strategies followers need to employ to ensure that they are not the victims of functionally stupid leadership. All educators should engage in questioning why they do things, not because they are challenging the authority of their line manager or educational leader but because they are fired by a genuine search for knowledge and understanding. This includes identifying areas where things are done because they have always been done in a particular manner: asking why and are there other ways to achieve what we are aiming for creates opportunities to learn, to develop new ways of looking at things and new understandings. Sometimes it is easy to fall into the trap of being seduced by new ideas, the latest fad, the newest idea: again all educators have a responsibility to ask themselves and their peers questions about these practices and these understandings. What are we doing, why are we doing this, what is it like for the children when we do this, are we achieving what we set out to achieve, are there other ways we could try?

#### 4. The way forward

I started this paper with a quote from Freire (1973) and it seems fitting to return to this work which not only offers identification of the issues, but also hope for a way forward:

Instead of following predetermined plans, leaders and people, mutually identified, together create the guidelines of their action. In this synthesis, leaders and people are somehow reborn in new knowledge and new action. Knowledge of the alienated culture leads to transforming action resulting in a culture which is being freed from alienation. (p. 162)

Freire offers hope that change can happen and that change must come from those intellectuals working in education (Chomsky, 2016). Our privilege associated with our status as intellectuals brings with it a responsibility to advocate for a better world, for a world where democracy flourishes and where all children have equal opportunities to participate, to shine and to be happy. Freire showed us that participation in critical reflection and critical action can make a difference. We have a responsibility to make that difference not only in our own lives, but in the lives of the children and families with whom we work. We “enjoy an unusual legacy of freedom, privilege, and opportunity thanks to the struggles of those who came before [us], and ... now face [the] fateful choices as to how to respond to challenges of great human import” (Chomsky, 2016, p. 258). Let us harness our courage, warm-up our voices and together fight for a better way.

Can the early childhood sector lead the challenge and fight for another way that defies the key impacts of neoliberalism: standardisation, the push-down curriculum and the imperative to create children who will become compliant, employable citizens? Whilst I acknowledge that one charismatic leader can make a difference in the world (for example, Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi), I argue successful change is more likely to arise from collaborative effort. In this way, each individual can choose action(s) that best suit circumstances and strengths. Educators can choose to develop learning opportunities that best address children’s rights and only when these have been identified, match them to the required curriculum documents. Educators can choose different approaches to the way they work with children and families: for example, the underpinning philosophy of Steiner education can be followed, with matching made against the required curricula where possible without compromising the fundamental elements of either (see Horne-Kennedy, 2014 as an example of this). Educators can choose to work more closely with families, supporting the development of their strengths and harnessing these to not only benefit the family but the community, and even the early childhood profession. This includes working with families and community members to forefront the voices that are often silenced (this often involves families who are living in poverty, who are migrants, Indigenous or families with teenage parents). Educators and educational leaders can

challenge the boundaries that define their roles: Why can they not work with communities to advocate for more family-friendly services? Why can they not organise staffing (and insurance and administrative issues) so they have the flexibility to collect the children of families who do not have transport? Why can't they use service resources to provide inexpensive meals families can take home for the evening meal? Why do they need a building to run a service when a shady tree might be more comfortable for some children and families?

If we don't take up this challenge, each and every one of us, then we are accepting that the best possible outcomes for children involve shaping them into a particular mould; ensuring they all learn what is defined in the standardised curriculum; and creating a future for them where they will function as uncritical neoliberal consumers whose major achievements involve owning the latest technology and having a huge number of friends on social media platforms. This is not a future vision we have to accept. We can choose to act to change this. Will each one of us have the courage to try?

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