As we entered into the final stages of producing this book, the world changed. Covid-19 swept across continents and countries, leaving disruption, suffering and death in its wake, compelling governments to take unprecedented steps to try to contain and suppress this plague, placing populations under lockdown and mobilising resources that would have seemed unimaginable a few weeks earlier. Covid-19 has also mercilessly exposed the flaws of the societies it has ravaged: the inequalities and injustices, as the poor, the precarious and other vulnerable groups have suffered the most; the neglect of public services and the undermining of welfare states that have weakened the capacity to resist; and the erosion of values necessary for effective collective action – equality, democracy, solidarity. Michael O’Higgins (2020), the President of Ireland, has pointedly referred to ‘the impact decades of unfettered neoliberalism have had on whole sectors of society and economy, left without protection as to basic necessities of life, security and the ability to participate’.

Dark times indeed, yet with faint glimmers of light showing through. Some leaders have been calm, reassuring and visionary, recognising that people’s well-being is fundamentally necessary for economic revival. There have been countless acts of individual and community kindness and care. After years of derision and disregard, we have been reminded of the value of the social state, of collective action and of the caring professions. Carbon emissions and other pollution have abated, swathes of cities have been dedicated to walking and cycling and the frenetic pace of modern-day life has temporarily slowed. There has also been cause and space to reflect on that life – the ‘pause’ button has been momentarily pressed, but do we want to resume as before once the crisis has passed or seek a different and better life? Arundhati Roy (2020, n.p.), the Indian
Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

In short, after the storm we can try to get back to ‘normal’. Or we can decide that, in the words of a graffiti in Hong Kong, ‘there can be no return to normal because normal was the problem in the first place’. Instead of more of the same we can opt for transformation, ready to imagine another and better world and to strive to achieve that vision.

This book is about the transformation option for one aspect of society – early childhood education and care. Given the moment of decision we find ourselves unexpectedly in, we think it is even more timely and relevant than when a group of us first began discussing the book in 2019. For this is a book that charts the deep flaws and pervasive dysfunctionalities in the past ‘normal’ and offers an imagined alternative, a transformation towards an integrated and universal system of public services for young children and their families, a revalued early childhood workforce that is trusted and supported, a pedagogy of listening that values all learning, accountability that is participatory and meaningful – and with the whole system of early childhood education inscribed with an ethic of care and the values of equality, democracy and solidarity. An imagined alternative, but one given credence by real examples of what is possible, drawn from home and abroad.

Rebecca Solnit (2020) has suggested that ‘it is too soon to know what will emerge from this emergency, but not too soon to start looking for chances to help decide it’. It is in this spirit that we offer this book: as a contribution to help decide on the future of early childhood education and care, as part of a much wider discussion about what we want for our children and for our world.
References


