The old world, which once looked stable, even immutable, is collapsing. A new era has begun, loaded with hazard if we fail to respond, charged with promise if we seize the moment. Whether the systems that emerge from this rupture are better or worse than the current dispensation depends on our ability to tell a new story, a story that learns from the past, places us in the present and guides the future. (Monbiot 2017, 1)

The preceding chapters have made the case that the state of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England is not good. The system itself is flawed and dysfunctional, still split between ‘childcare’ and ‘education’, with fragmented services, many operating as private businesses, competing with each other in a market that treats services as commodities and parents as consumers; and the whole shaky edifice dependent on the hard work and commitment of a female workforce of early childhood workers, most of whom are scandalously poorly paid and (relative to school teachers) under qualified, indicative of the low value placed by society on this important work. Moreover, despite recent government recognition of the needs of employed parents, there is a lack of synergy between the two most important policy areas to address these needs: leave for parents and ECEC for their children.

To these structural faults (the subject of Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 13) can be added serious shortcomings in what goes on within the system, in its practices and governance, what might be called pedagogical problems (the subject of Chapters 7 to 12). ECEC is in the grip of a culture of accountability, with its emphasis on standardised and measurable
outcomes, with its attendant risk: of ‘a ridiculous simplification of knowledge, and a robbing of meaning from individual histories’ (Cagliari et al. 2016, 378), with ‘subtle and fleeting’ signs of learning, so difficult to measure, easily overlooked; of schoolification, with downward pressure from a narrow compulsory schooling agenda of numeracy and literacy, accompanied by harmful effects on pedagogical practice such as ability grouping; and of a future-orientation, which not only uncritically and unrealistically assumes a future of more of the same, but prioritises a certain idea of what children should become at the expense of what is valuable and meaningful to children in the present.

Our contention then is, as we said in Chapter 1, that ECEC in England ‘is a failure on many counts; it does not work for children or parents, workers or society’ – though reiterating our qualification, that the failure lies with the system and the policies behind it, not those who work in it. But it is also evident that the parlous state for young children and their families goes well beyond the condition of ECEC (the subject of Chapters 2 and 3). After 40 years or more of neoliberal government, culminating in a decade of austerity, 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. These lives, too, suffer from a diminution of vital services, including the hollowing out of the recently created network of children’s centres as local authorities’ budgets have been slashed (spending on local services in England fell by 21 per cent between 2009–10 and 2017–18) (Partington 2019).

The erosion of local authority services is part of a wider process undermining the social infrastructure of communities, a process vividly described by journalist Aditya Chakrabortty (2019):

Britain is being stripped of its social infrastructure: the institutions that make up its daily life, the buildings and spaces that host friends and gently push strangers together. Public parks are disappearing. Playgrounds are being sold off. High streets are fast turning to desert. These trends are national, but their greatest force is felt in the poorest towns and suburbs, the most remote parts of the countryside, where there isn’t the footfall to lure in the businesses or household wealth to save the local boozer … Politicians bemoan the loss of community, but that resonant word is not precise enough. A large part of what’s missing is social infrastructure. It can be public or private. It is often slightly dog-eared and usually overlooked. But when it vanishes, the social damage can be huge.
The one exception to this picture of declining social provision is the inexorable rise in recent years of food banks, an emergency service unheard of before 2010, with the UK’s largest food bank network reporting a record 1.6 million food parcels distributed in the year to March 2019 (Trussell Trust 2019).

Nor can we leave this dismaying account of the state we’re in without acknowledging perhaps the greatest long-term threat to young children and their families, the converging crises of a ravaged environment: global heating, multiple forms of pollution, the depletion of essential resources and diminishing bio-diversity. Most immediately, this environmental emergency affects children’s health, the World Health Organization (WHO 2018) estimating that ‘every day around 93% of the world’s children under the age of 15 years (1.8 billion children) breathe air that is so polluted it puts their health and development at serious risk’. Other effects of these converging crises will make themselves increasingly felt, with young children always most vulnerable, along with those both nationally and globally who are poorest (and least culpable).

Such is the state we are in, a state so serious that it justifies a call for transformative change, a change that goes beyond ‘reformist tinkering’ to a complete re-thinking that leads to radical, root-and-branch re-forming, calling on (in George Monbiot’s words) ‘our ability to tell a new story’. In this final chapter, we will focus on the transformation of ECEC; to tackle more is beyond our scope and capabilities. But we reiterate that this needs to be part of a larger transformation: a renewal of the whole education system, of the welfare state,1 of our social infrastructure, and above all, a radical transformation of the way we live if humankind is to survive the environmental emergency – for we cannot carry on as we are. A transformed ECEC should be seen, therefore, as but one part of a transformed society – democratic and just, caring and sustainable – in which all can flourish.

We approach our limited brief, with its focus on transforming ECEC, as a political task, by which we mean (as we argued at the start of this book) that change must be built on the answer to political questions, that is, ‘not mere technical issues to be solved by experts ... [but questions that] always involve decisions which require us to make choices between conflicting alternatives’ (Mouffe 2007). Technical issues, of the ‘what works?’ and ‘how to?’ variety, have their place, but addressing these should come after political questions have been asked and political choices made.
Some political questions and political choices

We proposed some political questions relevant to ECEC in Chapter 1, and will focus on just some here – those that we think are particularly important. First, *What is our image of the child?* That is, who do we think or imagine the child to be? This question follows the advice of Loris Malaguzzi that a declaration about the image of the child ‘is not only a necessary act of clarity and correctness, it is the necessary premise for any pedagogical theory, and any pedagogical project’ (Cagliari et al. 2016, 374). While no policy document in England has offered such a declaration, in practice the image of the child that is offered, reading between the lines, is that of the ‘poor’ child: in need, passive, malleable, under-developed, not ready, an empty vessel into which prescribed competencies and so-called ‘fundamental British values’ need to be poured. Our choice would be different, again following Malaguzzi in proposing an image of the ‘rich’ child, ‘rich’ not in the economic sense, but meaning that all children are ‘better equipped, more talented, stronger and more intelligent than we can suppose’ (Cagliari et al. 2016, 397), ‘not bottles to be filled’ but ‘active in constructing the self and knowledge through social interactions and inter-dependencies’. Children born with great potential that can be expressed in a hundred languages. Children, too, who are citizens, ‘not bearers of needs, but bearers of rights, values and competencies’ (Cagliari et al. 2016, 377).

Second, *What is an early childhood education and care system for? What is its purpose?* Clearly, it has an educative purpose, though that raises the question of what we mean by ‘education’. We favour ‘education-in-its-broadest-sense’:

> a long-established concept of education that understands education as fostering and supporting the general well-being and development of children and young people, and their ability to interact effectively with their environment and to live a good life. This is education as a process of upbringing and increasing participation in the wider society, with the goal that both individual and society flourish. (Moss and Haydon 2008, 2)

But we would also see such a system as having many other potential purposes, responding to a range of needs and desires from children, parents, communities and societies. Other services, such as various health and welfare services, may be provided under its aegis, as already happens
in many surviving children’s centres; so, too, may numerous other projects – cultural, social, political, environmental and economic. Writing about the transformative potential of compulsory school education, but also, we think, with application to early childhood education, Keri Facer envisages schools as public spaces where community members have the opportunity ‘to encounter each other and learn from each other’ and where they can begin ‘to build the intergenerational solidarity, respect for diversity and democratic capability needed to ensure fairness in the context of socio-technical change’. As such, education can contribute not only to improving the here and now, but also to that wider social transformation that we refer to above, including equipping ‘communities to respond to and shape the socio-technical changes of the next few years’ (Facer 2011, 28). Writing more recently, on the possible response of public education to the climate emergency, Facer further develops the solidaristic, democratic and transformative purpose of education, through its capacity to ‘engage students and their wider communities in meaningful real-life projects of mitigation and community-building … Centrally, a key role of the public school is that it has the potential to convene publics around the challenge of reducing emissions’ (Facer 2019, 209). To which might be added the potential to ‘convene publics’ around many of the other challenges that face us today.

Where does this leave ‘childcare for working parents’? The ‘care’ part of ‘early childhood education and care’ has been by far the dominant theme of government policy in England in recent years. We see the support of parents in their many roles and activities as an important purpose for an ECEC system, and this includes support for parents in employment – but also for those studying, active in civic society and participating in other personally and socially important activities. One way this is provided is by services being open for a substantial period each day, up to 12 hours, though individual children would not attend for as long as this, except in very exceptional circumstances (we also recognise there is an important debate to be had about how far it is the job of ECEC to meet all demands of the labour market). But this support for parents in employment, and supporting parents to enter employment, is, as we have indicated above, just one of many purposes served by the ECEC system. Moreover, all children attending early childhood services, or indeed schools, require care, whether or not their parents are employed; care, we would suggest, that takes the form of an ‘ethics of care’, defining a relationship that includes both particular acts of caring and a general habit of mind that should inform all aspects of life and which includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness (Tronto 1993).
This leads us to propose no more talk of ‘childcare services’, but much talk of how to work with an ‘ethics of care’ with all children and across all services for children. Indeed, we would suggest transforming the discourse from ‘early childhood education and care’ to ‘early childhood education’, taking a lead on this from New Zealand, where by the 1990s, as a result of re-thinking and reform, “early childhood education” (ECE) again became the integrating concept and official term as people took for granted that early education involved care as well. Early childhood education continues to be used as the generic term covering the diverse range of types of ECE services in New Zealand’ (Meade and Podmore 2010, 32). So, in future let us adopt the New Zealand way and talk of ‘early childhood education’ or ECE, recognising there can be no education without care.

Third, What are the fundamental values of early childhood education? We would propose four here, by no means a comprehensive listing. First, equality: all young children, including children with special educational needs, should have equal access to good, affordable and local services. Second, democracy, with its attendant qualities of listening, dialogue and respect for diversity, enacted in pedagogy and management, in everyday life and relationships. Third, cooperation, within and between services, replacing the present valuing of competition. Fourth, solidarity, replacing the current valuing of competitive individualism and privatised consumerism.

Solidarity is or can be apparent in many forms: workplace solidarity, intergenerational solidarity, cultural solidarity, solidarity with humankind and with our environment, solidarity within and between services. Solidarity, we believe, is a vital building block for a cohesive and caring society and a strong welfare state. Solidarity is a standpoint and a value representing common ground among citizens or others who share an interest; it expresses the principle that ‘people ought to cooperate with each other not simply because of what they personally receive, but also from a real commitment to the well-being of others and a sense of moral obligation that it is right to do’ (Wright 2019, 18). As such, it acts as a connector between peoples and provides a motivation for services from which all can benefit (Derpmann 2018); the recognition that is gained from standing in solidarity with others generates self-esteem for individuals (Honneth 1995).

These values – equality, democracy, cooperation, solidarity – do not stand alone, but are inter-connected, all contributing to a flourishing life, each fostering the others. Early childhood services, which have a responsibility for upbringing and are physically sited in communities, are
‘portals in to the community’ for young children, with potential to build social capital by enhancing both their internally focused ‘bonding’ ties and their externally orientated ‘bridging’ ties (Putnam 2000). Bridging ties are particularly important to avoid exclusionary practices, to learn about communities and to exercise community solidarity. In this way, ECE can connect diverse groups, which is essential for expanding networks and opportunities, and so promote social inclusion and cohesion.

Fourth, What is our image of the early childhood centre? In practice, the present-day image of the centre, while not officially stated, is as a factory intended to produce predetermined, standardised and measurable outcomes and as a private business, selling a commodity to parent-customers in the market place. Our image is very different. We see the centre as a public space and a public resource, a place of encounter between citizens, children and adults, a forum in civil society where:

children and adults may participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance … Determining these projects – answering the basic question ‘what are early childhood institutions for?’ – is one of the political projects of the institution as forum, as well as for the wider society; it is an issue for continuous dialogue between children and adults, including local and national politicians. (Dahlberg et al. 2013, 80)

Picking up on earlier discussions, we also envisage early childhood centres as a place to ‘convene publics’ to address urgent challenges and as part of the social infrastructure, necessary for the health, vitality and solidarity of any local community.

Fifth, What do we want for our children, here and now and in the future? For a start, we as adults need to dwell less on preparing children for a predetermined (and impossible) future of intensifying competition, endless consumption and inexorable growth, a policy ambition that is linked to spiralling mental health crises and declining happiness among children (The Children’s Society 2019), and more on how we can begin the hard task of changing course towards a sustainable, just and democratic world, in which today’s children can flourish as tomorrow’s adults. In short, as Facer (2011) puts it, prioritising future-building over future-proofing.

In the meantime, we must focus on making a better here and now for our children, valuing them as beings and not just becomings; and valuing, too, education and other services for children, in John Dewey’s words, ‘as a process of living and not a preparation for future living’ (Dewey
A good starting point is to take seriously the commitments already made by adults to children, yet too often ignored, commitments, for example, expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, that include children's right to:

- express [their] views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Article 12)
- the highest attainable standard of health … taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution (Article 24)
- adequate nutritious foods (Article 24)
- a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (Article 27)
- [the provision of] material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing (Article 27)
- engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (Article 31). (United Nations 1989)

The subsequent General Comment No.7 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on ‘Implementing child rights in early childhood’ elaborates how these commitments apply to young children. It starts by stating that ‘young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] and that early childhood is a critical period for the realization of these rights’ (UNCRC 2005, para. 1).

Not only are young children holders of rights, but they should be:

active participant[s] in the promotion, protection and monitoring of their rights … with freedom to express views and the right to be consulted in matters that affect [them] … The right to express views and feelings should be anchored in the child’s daily life at home (including, when applicable, the extended family) and in [their] community; within the full range of early childhood health, care and education facilities, as well as in legal proceedings; and in the development of policies and services, including through research and consultations. (UNCRC 2005, para. 10)

The Committee emphasises that the ‘Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognized as active members of
families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view’ (UNCRC 2005, para. 6). The Committee reminds:

States parties (and others concerned) that the [young child’s] right to survival and development can only be implemented in a holistic manner, through the enforcement of all the other provisions of the Convention, including rights to health, adequate nutrition, social security, an adequate standard of living, a healthy and safe environment, education and play. (UNCRC 2005, para. 10)

The Committee is critical of how services for young children are often fragmented and their ‘planning often piecemeal and uncoordinated’ (UNCRC 2005, para. 22), and argues that:

• services should be ‘rights-based, coordinated, multisectoral’ (UNCRC 2005, para. 22)
• work with young children ‘should be socially valued and properly paid, in order to attract a highly qualified workforce, men as well as women’ (UNCRC 2005, para. 23)
• the right of the child to education begins ‘at birth and [is] closely linked to young children’s right to maximum development’ (UNCRC 2005, para. 28)

It is with this last right, to education beginning at birth, that we now turn, while holding in mind that it is just one of a number of important rights, a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for what we might want for our children, here and now.

Towards transformative change of early childhood education

Based on political questions and choices, taking inspiration from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and informed by the preceding chapters, we propose transformative change towards a public system of early childhood education, available as of right to all children and their parents (or other carers). By ‘public’ we mean the public taking collective responsibility, through democratic decision-making: for providing services that are open to all young children and their families, based on
the right to education from birth, and early childhood education being recognised as a public good, whose benefits reach beyond the individual users of these services to the wider society; and also services that are provided by public authorities (such as local authorities) or by private non-profit organisations that are accountable to these public authorities, and all of which subscribe to democratically determined and shared values, principles and goals. As we have discussed, ‘education’ is understood as a broad concept, and an ‘education’ system is not confined to learning (whether formal or informal) but includes other purposes. This public system would be inscribed with values of equality, democracy, cooperation and solidarity, and an ethics of care: values and ethics that would be expressed in the relationships between services, but also in relationships within services, including in the approach taken to management and leadership, pedagogical work and assessment.

The preceding chapters have provided detailed suggestions and examples for how different aspects of such transformative change might be enacted: some from other countries (Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden), some from England. Here, therefore, we will confine ourselves to highlighting some broad structural principles of a transformed public system of early childhood education, the main building blocks of such a system:

1. The system would be fully integrated across all structural dimensions (policymaking, administration, curriculum, regulation, access, funding, workforce, type of provision), and underpinned by an integrative concept, that is, a broad concept of education working with an ethics of care, so finally removing the education/care split.

2. The system of early childhood education would be combined with an entitlement to at least 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 (parental leave and early childhood education are viewed as necessary but not sufficient conditions for both gender equality and work-life balance).

3. This integrated system would be available as of right for children from birth to 6 years and their carers; as nearly all children would be at home with parents during their first year (because of the availability of well-paid leave), this would mean access to various child-and-parent services in children’s centres (see 4 below) during this early period, with children starting to attend on their own during their second year.
4. The reformed system would be based on a fully integrated, multi-purpose and community-serving early childhood centre, which might be called a children’s centre (or, if matched by similar transformative change throughout the compulsory school sector, an ‘extended school for young children’).

5. The core staffing for this form of provision would be a well-educated graduate professional specialising in work with children from birth to 6 years, having parity of status and conditions with compulsory school teachers and accounting for at least 60 per cent of staff working directly with children. The argument has been made in this book for the professional to be a social pedagogue, as found in some countries today; in other countries, the professional is an early years teacher.

6. Early childhood education for children from birth to 6 years would be recognised as the first stage of the education system, with primary (and compulsory) education starting at age 6, and as being of comparable standing to other stages in the education system with which it should develop strong and equal partnerships.

7. Attendance by children for a core period (for example, 30 hours a week, 38 weeks a year) would be free of charge, the core period being equivalent to normal school hours in the compulsory education sector, so matching the right to education from birth to the education principle of free attendance, with parents contributing on a means-tested basis for children attending additional hours up to a capped maximum level.

8. Services would be funded directly, rather than indirectly via subsidies paid to parents, that is, supply-side funding would entirely replace demand-side funding, so applying the same principle to early childhood education as applies to primary and secondary education, with the amount payable being sufficient to assure high-quality services, regardless of location.

9. Local authorities would play a key role in this transformed system, including: acting as service planners; facilitating cooperation and solidarity between centres and between centres and other services for children and families; offering specialist expertise in relation to disability or other special circumstances; supporting experimentation and knowledge exchange; contributing to a competent system of support for services and their workforces; evaluating local services; and providing some services directly themselves, as well as determining which non-profit private providers would provide the remaining services for the public system.
10. Central government would have a commensurately reduced, but still important, strategic role, for example, being responsible for setting broad policy goals, creating a framework national curriculum, ensuring necessary national infrastructure (for example, education of early childhood workers), evaluating the system overall, sharing funding costs with local authorities, and overseeing and supporting local authorities in their role.

So far, our discussion of transformative structural change has focused very much on schools and other centre-based services. But there is another form of provision that plays an important part in today’s early childhood system: childminding or family day care. Our view is that such provision should also form part of the proposed public system of early childhood education, benefiting, for example, from direct funding, improved qualifications (though not necessarily at graduate level) and working conditions, and strong support. However, we are less certain about the future place of childminding. The number of childminders has fallen substantially in recent years, down 29 per cent in England between 2012 and 2018 (Gaunt 2019). By 2019, they accounted for just 18 per cent of childcare and early years places, and this fall is likely to continue, with fewer joiners than leavers every year (Ofsted 2019), as the occupation proves less appealing to women.

We also think that demand for childminding will decrease, with parents opting to use a public system of local and affordable children’s centres. We say this because there is evidence that existing publicly funded early childhood education services are already an attractive proposition: almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of state-funded nursery schools in England are rated ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted and nearly all the rest are rated ‘Good’ (Ofsted 2019). The experience of Sweden is also telling: over time, accessible, affordable and well-run centres have proved to be highly popular, with childminding withering away as ‘preschool’ provision has been built up.

Transformative change requires attention to pedagogical as well as structural principles. Earlier chapters have reminded us that we have the good fortune, in implementing pedagogical principles, of drawing on rich traditions of educational thought and experience. We must take full advantage of this invaluable cultural heritage represented by the thought and work of past pedagogues such as Froebel, Dewey, McMillan, Isaacs, Freinet, Freire and Malaguzzi.

Drawing on these cultural reserves, as well as the intelligence and expertise of today’s practitioners, a pedagogical transformation can be
embarked upon, turning away from a culture of targets, measurement and what Paulo Freire (n.d.) termed a ‘banking concept of education’, which treats learners as empty containers into which predefined knowledge is deposited. Previous chapters in this book map out a new cultural direction for early childhood education in England. It is an education in which cooperation and participation, democracy and listening are central pedagogical values and ethics, informing our way of being with and relating to young children. It is an education that slows down, adopting notions of slow knowledge and slow thinking and slow pedagogy, notions that value lingering, revisiting, reflection, and that lead to deep learning and rich meaning-making. It is an education that is comfortable with uncertainty and unpredictability, and so opens up to the unexpected and the surprising, to rediscover and to express wonder about the immediate and abstract world. It is an education that understands the importance of context and interpretation, and is sceptical of attempts to apply, unquestioningly, universal standards. It is an education in which observation and documentation, and in particular pedagogical documentation, enable all learning of all children, in its full diversity and complexity, to become visible and valued, and which understands assessment as a cooperative and dynamic process embedded in everyday educational experience. It is an education that will enable a turning away from the current demand for managerial accounting, towards a search for democratic, participatory and meaningful accountability. It is an education that recognises the importance of skilled and trusted practitioners, able to co-construct both curriculum and learning with children understood to be valued protagonists in education. Last but not least, it is an education based on trust in and respect for the agency, capabilities and potentialities of all involved, whether children, practitioners, parents or others.

So, we are not against assessment, nor against evaluation or accountability, but we think there are major issues to be resolved around purpose, process and participation. What, how and who? Nor are we against measuring and counting, when there is a clear rationale for this, and as long as numbers are not reified but are treated as just one form of documentation, to be critically discussed, reflected upon and interpreted alongside other forms of documentation. On this we agree with management expert Henry Mintzberg (interview, in Caulkin 2003) when he says:

We’ve become prisoners of measurement: audits, league tables, targets. It just destroys creativity. Look, I’m not opposed to measuring things that can be measured – I’m opposed to letting those things
drive everything else out. It has some destructive effect in business, but in education and healthcare it’s absolutely devastating.

What would happen if we started from the premise that we can’t measure what matters and go from there? Then instead of measurement we’d have to use something very scary: it’s called judgment. A society without judgment is a society that’s lost. And that’s what bureaucracy does: it drives out judgment.

**Is this a real utopia?**

The term ‘real utopia’ was coined by the American sociologist Erik Olin Wright to emphasise that proposals for transformative change should not only be desirable (that is, ‘utopian’), but also viable and achievable (that is, ‘real’ or doable). ‘Desirability’ pays particular attention to values, ethics and goals; this is what we want for our children and our society. ‘Viability’ is:

- a response to the perpetual objection to radical egalitarian proposals: ‘it sounds good on paper, but it will never work’ … Two kinds of analysis are especially pertinent here: systematic theoretical models of how particular social structures and institutions would work, and empirical studies of cases, both historical and contemporary, where at least some aspects of the proposal have been tried. (Wright 2007, 27)

While ‘achievability’ is about the process of transformation and the practical political work of strategies for social change: ‘It asks of proposals for social change that have passed the test of desirability and viability, what it would take to actually implement them’ (Wright 2007, 27). In short, how might you scale up such proposals.

Judged against these criteria, we think we have supplied sufficient evidence, either in actual case studies or theoretical models, to prove the viability of both structural and pedagogical transformation – these things could be done or are already to be found in practice today. Much more work is needed (which is true of any major change), but we contend that transformation is patently doable. Achievability, putting our proposals for transformational change into general usage, is, we admit, more problematic, because of the scale and complexity of what is needed to extend from local instances to general application.
There are, we think, three main conditions that need to be in place if achievability is to happen, and none of them are easy. First, politically there needs to be a turn away from the neoliberal regime of the last 40 years, which has brought marketisation, privatisation, individualism and competition to the fore, including but going far beyond early childhood education. Transformative change, as presented here, assumes a politics based on very different beliefs and values, not least equality, democracy, cooperation and solidarity, with a renewed welfare state infused by a rediscovered sense of public good and collective responsibility.

It’s a big ask, but we see some slivers of hope. Neoliberalism remains a powerful force in the land, but its days may be numbered. Its claims are increasingly discredited, its harmful consequences are more and more apparent, its incompatibility with finding solutions to the converging environmental problems manifest; in short, its time may be nearly up as its cycle of dominance draws to an end and it enters into crisis. Or, as George Monbiot puts it in the excerpt that starts this chapter, the old world is collapsing and a new era beginning. At which stage the words of Milton Friedman (1962/1982, ix), one of the godfathers of neoliberalism quoted at the start of this book, come to mind again:

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.

Like Milton Friedman and his neoliberal allies in the 1960s anticipat- ing the imminent crisis of the then-dominant regime of social democ- racy, today those who oppose neoliberalism need to be prepared for its imminent crisis, ensuring there are transformative ideas ‘lying around’, developing ‘alternatives to existing policies’, getting ready for when the ‘politically impossible becomes politically inevitable’. Or, in Monbiot’s words, for a better system we must be able to tell a new story. This book, then, is a contribution to that task, of developing new ideas or telling a new story, in one relatively small but important field.

The first condition, therefore, that needs to be in place for achiev- ability is profound political change. The second condition is more prosaic, finding a way to transition from what we have to where we want to get to. Such a shift between two very different systems, from one based on markets and competing businesses to one based on co-operation and public services, from one based on managerialism and measurement to one
based on democracy and deliberation, would generate opposition especially from private, for-profit providers who would not fit into a public system based on values of equality, democracy, cooperation and solidarity. Such providers would not and could not be forced out of business by legal prohibition, but would lose access to their life-blood of public funding.

It should be emphasised that any major transformation cannot and will not occur overnight. There needs to be a long transition period, to build up both new institutions and a new workforce, of probably at least 15 years. During that period, all public funding of early childhood services would be consolidated in a single early childhood fund, and gradually shifted from the current split disbursement (some money paid to services, some to parents) to a single funding system involving direct payment to an expanding public system and its network of preferred services, that is, children’s centres.

This means the gradual withdrawal of public funding from the private, for-profit sector. The sector would have time for adjustment, allowing some nursery providers and their financial backers to turn to full reliance on parental fees (like private schools) and others to withdraw from the field; childminders could choose to become part of the public system, becoming essentially salaried workers, or else opt to work outside it. Measures, too, would be put in place for existing ‘childcare workers’ to upgrade their qualifications to become professionals in the early childhood education system, and for some nursery owners, too, to find employment in the new public system; transformation should not lead to redundancies, but rather to better working conditions and improved job status. However, with the changes in funding and the development of an integrated public system, there is no escaping the fact that transformation would bring, as political rhetoric says, ‘hard choices’ that mean unwelcome disruption to some service providers, but this might be kept to a minimum through central-funding mechanisms, a transition period and local authority-led sector expertise.

A final condition for transformative change is continuity. Structural changes, including to the workforce, will take years to complete. Pedagogical changes, which involve profound shifts in culture and thinking, as well as in practice, may take even longer; indeed, they might be thought of as a continuous process of movement and experimentation. If we take, for example, the cases of New Zealand or Sweden, featured in earlier chapters, transformation has taken decades to bring about and is still in progress; especially in the former case, changes of government have caused disruptions and uncertainties. England does not have a good track record here, the post-2010 Conservative-led governments
thoughtlessly dismantling or neglecting much that the preceding Labour government had sought to build up (for example, children’s centres, extended schools, policies such as ‘Every Child Matters’).

Yet at the same time, there have been continuities, in particular an ongoing commitment to marketisation and privatisation, individual choice and provider competition, strong central control and the importance of ‘childcare’. What underpinned this continuity was a shared belief by successive Labour and Conservative governments in neoliberalism and the methods of new public management, with its emphasis on standard setting and performance measurement. Perhaps in a future where neoliberalism has lost its allure, and another political regimen has gained prominence, one more suited to the times we live in, valuing democracy and decentralisation, equality and inclusion, solidarity and sustainability, a degree of continuity could be rebuilt on other foundations – and this time, also, involving a stronger role for local democracy.

We are confident in the desirability and viability of our utopian proposal for transformative change. Its achievability is, we admit, less certain, dependent on a number of imponderables – while the ominous shadow of the environmental emergency hangs over all, making it especially hard to see what the future may hold. But, like so much else in England today, early childhood education is in a poor state, unfit for purpose and unable to do justice to our young children, endlessly telling an old story that was never up to much. Surely we are capable of telling a better story.

Notes

1. We note that at the time of writing this book, the Child Poverty Action Group has begun a new project on an important part of the welfare state, the social security system. The project, ‘Secure Futures for Children and Families’, will ask the question: What does a social security system that provides a secure future for children and families look like? (https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/secure-futures-children-and-families).

2. An increasing number of countries are now adapting leave policies to accommodate same-sex parents. Some also provide extra leave in the case of single parents where there is no second parent to share leave (Koslowski et al. 2019).

References

