

Aisling Gallagher (2022) *Childcare Provision in Neoliberal Times – The marketization of Care*. Bristol: Bristol University Press. 170 pp (ISBN 978-1-5292-0649-4 hardcover) £80; £24.99 pbk, available September 2023

Among several recent studies exploring marketised childcare systems in neoliberal states from different disciplinary perspectives (Roberts-Homes and Moss, 2021; Simon et al., 2022; Vandenbroeck et al., 2023), social geographer Aisling Gallagher's engagingly written monograph offers a deep dive into the 'complex everyday work of market making' (p. 125), a process which she regards as a 'highly experimental frontier for policy' (p. 69).

*Childcare Provision in Neoliberal Times* focuses on the development of the Aotearoa/New Zealand childcare market over a thirty-year period. Gallagher positions her research into the political, social, and economic work underpinning its 'state-led marketization' (p. 3) in opposition to previous critiques of the negative impact of increasing childcare marketisation and commodification on young children, their parents as proxy childcare consumers, and the childcare workforce. Gallagher wishes 'to move beyond the critiques of the problems of marketized childcare' (p. 3) with the aim of producing a better understanding of its operation.

Chapter one, 'Childcare as a market of collective concern' (pp. 1-24) explains how her focus on market construction helps identify both human and non-human actors engaged in markets pursuing collective social aims. Here Gallagher also justifies her choice of conceptual framework: recent developments in the Social Studies of Marketization (SSM) literature, familiar from economic sociology, cultural economics, and economic geography. She claims this enable a more dispassionate approach in analysing this 'morally contentious domain' (p.21).

Chapter two, 'Childcare markets as an object of study' (pp. 25-44) examines the literature on the changing relationship between neoliberal states and all aspects of marketised childcare and traces the emergence of for-profit providers as a dominant player in these markets.

Employing the SSM analytical framework, chapter three 'State-led marketization' (pp. 45-69) forms the backbone of the book, as it reports on Gallagher's study of the 'complex and fragile process' (p. 68) involved in the creation of New Zealand's state-led childcare market between 1989 and the present. This creation originated with a 1989 Labour government which invested substantial supply-side public funding in not-for-profit childcare businesses and provided demand-side childcare cost subsidies to low-income families. The evolution

of this market continued under another four governments, with National and Labour governments alternating in power.

Gallagher expertly highlights the radical policy changes resulting from the turn-taking between centre-right and centre-left governments during this period. The introduction of 20 hours free childcare for three- and four-year-olds under the 1999-2008 Labour administration (p. 66) proved a key turn in the expansion of the private-for-profit component of the sector. In its wake came the growth of diverse financial entities, such as a childcare property investment market and childcare finance companies operating within the market 'assemblage' (p.133). This policy's impact shows how governments may effectively lose control of the state-led market they themselves created.

Chapter 4 'Private providers, childcare labour and the problem of finance' (pp. 70-90) considers the consequences of the growth of big childcare chains, through market consolidation, on childcare providers and the workforce. It demonstrates how business models impact on their engagement with children using the services (p.74) and leads to increasing social segregation.

Chapters 5 and 6, 'The childcare property investment market' (pp. 91-110) and 'Childcare management software and data infrastructures in the market' (pp. 111-129), contribute fascinating and original knowledge in key domains closely associated with childcare marketization that remain under- researched.

Almost inevitably, having scrutinized how state-led marketization works in practice, Gallagher reaches conclusions in chapter seven (pp. 130-138) much like those arrived at by childcare market researchers who approached the subject from different perspectives (Lloyd and Penn, 2013; Moss, 2014). Namely that '...having low(er) quality care and education for young children, suppressing pay and working conditions for staff in the sector, and resulting in the transferral of considerable amounts of public funding to an increasing variety of private entities' (p. 130). The welcome addition of an 'Epilogue: Market responses to COVID-19' (pp. 139-142) evidences how the pandemic amplified such marketization risks.

To contextualise the argument, the book would have benefitted from the inclusion of illustrations of the changing shape of the New Zealand childcare market over time and a more detailed description of its service plurality, such as Boyask (2020) provided for market driven education. The growing international debate on the role of private equity in childcare markets is hardly touched on, while the differential impact of the state-led marketization process on New Zealand's ethnically diverse population is left virtually unexamined.

Despite these gaps, Gallagher's book makes an important contribution to the childcare marketization literature and to the field of critical social policy.

## References

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