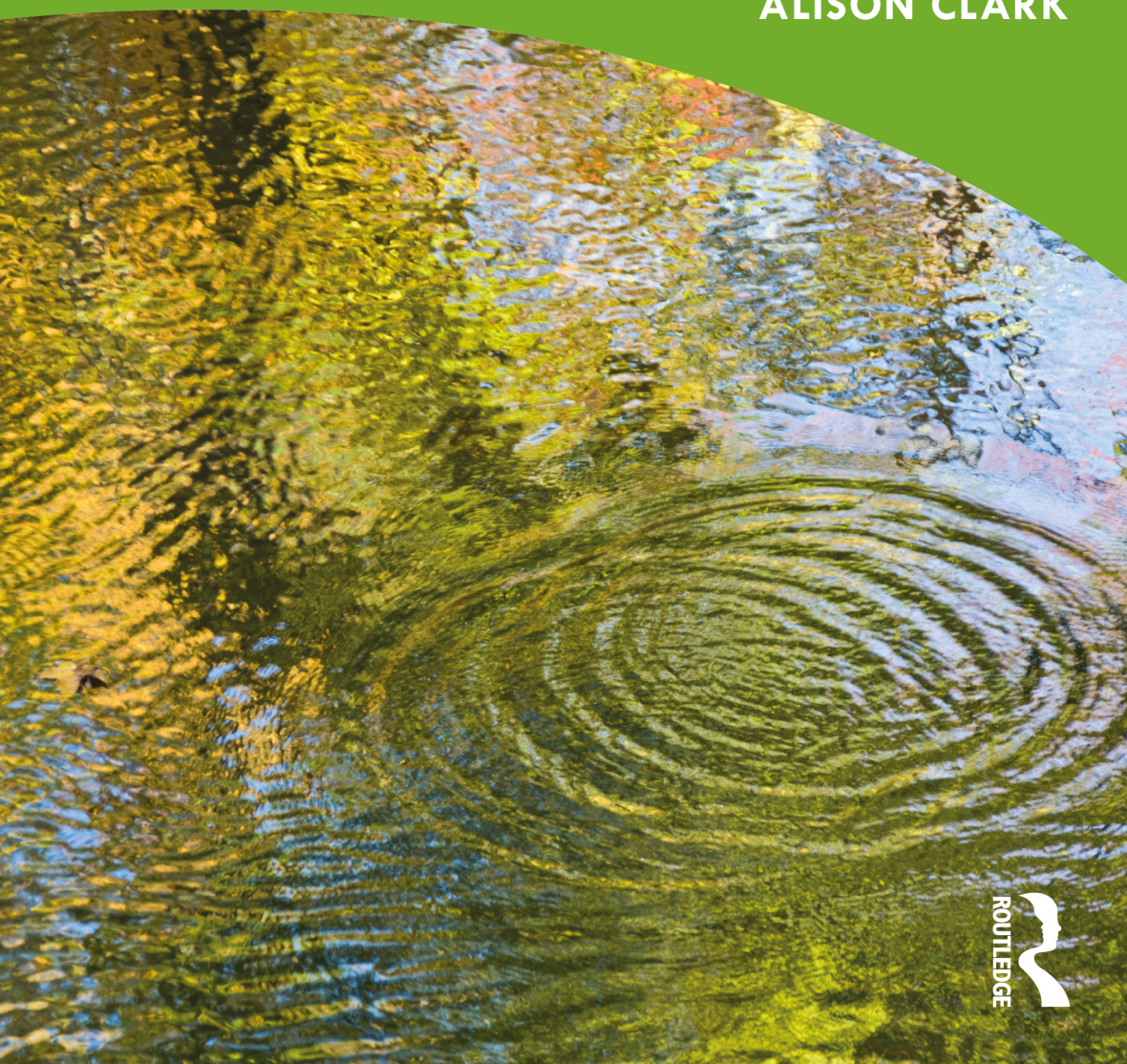
CONTESTING EARLY CHILDHOOD

SLOW KNOWLEDGE AND THE UNHURRIED CHILD

Time for Slow Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education

ALISON CLARK



ROUTLEDGE

SLOW KNOWLEDGE AND THE UNHURRIED CHILD

This book explores the relationship with time in early childhood by arguing for the valuing of slow pedagogies and slow knowledge. Alison Clark points to alternative practices in Early Childhood Education and Care that enable a different pace and rhythm, against the backdrop of the acceleration in early childhood and the proliferation of testing and measurement. Diverse approaches are explored to enable an 'unhurried child' and less hurried adults.

Slow Knowledge and the Unhurried Child is divided in three parts. Part 1, Reasons to be slow, looks at the pressures in Early Childhood Education and Care to speed up and for children to be 'readied' for the next stage. The book then explores different relationships with time for young children and educators. Part 2, Slow pedagogies and practices, explore some of the forms slow practices can take including outdoors, in the studio, in everyday routines, through stories, in pedagogical documentation and in 'slow' research. Part 3, Moving forward, shows what a 'timefull' approach to ECEC can look like, whilst debating the challenges and possibilities that exist.

The book serves as a catalyst for urgent discussion about the need to slow down in early childhood education and teacher education and explores case studies of where slow practices in early childhood education are already happening. It will be a key reading for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers about the relationship with time in early childhood and the importance of taking a longer view.

Alison Clark is Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of South-Eastern Norway and Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Education, University College London, UK.

Contesting Early Childhood

Series Editors: Liselott Mariett Olsson and Michel Vandenbroeck

This ground-breaking series questions the current dominant discourses surrounding early childhood and offers instead alternative narratives of an area that is now made up of a multitude of perspectives and debates.

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Alison Clark

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FOREWORD

A study by Brecht Peleman et al. (2020) showed that three-year-olds in Kindergarten in Flanders spend up to 20 to 30% of their time waiting. The reason is that their teachers want to hurry because of the pressure they experience to teach these children what is expected from them in the next year by the next teacher. As a result, much of their time and of the children's time is spent on organising the transition times to lunch, to outdoors, or to other activities as "efficiently" as possible, and the group must wait until the last child is ready. In order not to waste any time, children are kept silent during the waiting time. It is but one of the abundant examples we find in early childhood in many countries of what I have named in previous publications (Vandenbroeck 2017) as 'the Olympic games of development', a vision on child development as sports discipline, aligned with the Olympic slogan 'citius, altius, fortius' (faster, higher, stronger). It is what Alison Clark labels as "accelerated childhoods". In this book she critically looks at the increasing impatience of the educational system. Her critical analysis offers a broad view on how early childhood education is related not only to the entire 'hurrying' educational system from preschool to higher education, but also to the broader society. She holds out a mirror to us, reflecting on the fundamental question of 'what is education for?' And in doing so, she also questions what educational research is for, as she relates the hurrying early childhood also to a hurrying science.

What this book uniquely offers the reader is not only fine analysis and reflection on the times we are living in. Alison Clark urges us to stop for a moment and look at what we are doing in early childhood education. A particularly important contribution of this book is that it presents to us the possibility of not taking the highway, as she describes several possibilities of sideways. She rightly argues that these sideways are not the same as taking a step back, that slowing down is not just a romantic idea of going back to an unproductive era or a longing for a past that never existed. On the contrary, it is about taking time to think about what

matters, about gaining depth, about preparing for unpredictability, about expecting the unexpected. The fastest way from A to B may very well be a straight line, but that may not necessarily be the line that prepares one for real life or for the life that we wish to be real.

Alison Clark explores what slow pedagogy is all about. Therefore, she offers choices, alternative pathways and these are both theoretically deepened and illustrated with many observations of children's experiences and interactions. The ways in which these cases are presented relates theory with fine analyses of daily practice and strong ethical concerns.

What is true for the hurried child is equally true for the hurried scientist. Increasingly, we find alerts on social media from researchers who are stepping out of the academic rat race where the publication pressure leads to 'slicing' findings into ever smaller publishable parts, data fixing, plagiarism, and other forms of scientific fraud, leading to ever higher numbers of article retractions. Science risks to be reduced to what is publishable as relevance tends to be reduced to the impact factor of the journal where the results are published. Innovation and reflection are to be concealed in 6,000 words, an abstract and a bibliography. The work of Alison Clark is a strong antidote to this illness in the educational research community. It is an exercise in listening, acknowledging that listening and giving voice (for example, to children) does take time and cannot or should not be formatted in a 6,000-word limit and an impact factor.

With this book, Alison Clark does exactly what the book series 'Contesting Early Childhood' aims at: offering alternatives and, in her words, time to rethink. The book should be recommended reading not only for future early childhood scholars, but also for practitioners and policy-makers. I sincerely wish they will take the time to read and think. As the Belgian-French singer songwriter Jacques Brel sang, there are two kinds of time: the time that waits and the time that hopes. The present book offers us time that hopes.

Michel Vandenbroeck

Peleman, B., Van Avermaet, P., and Vandenbroeck, M., 2020. Early learning opportunities for children at risk of social exclusion. Opening the black box of preschool practice. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 28, 21–42.

Vandenbroeck, M., 2017. Introduction: Constructions of truth in early childhood education. *In:* M. Vandenbroeck, ed. *Constructions of neuroscience in early childhood education*. London: Routledge, 1–19.

PREFACE

Time and context

Books hold time in a particular way – the time in which the book is conceived and written and subsequently published and read and perhaps even returned to.

The evidence of the wider context is inevitably going to be apparent in a book that takes *time* as a central theme; in this case in relationship to early childhood education, pedagogy and practices and the wider higher education environment.

My ideas have grown over the past ten years or more. The research study that forms the central frame started in January 2020. It seems important to state this starting point as three months into the study we were facing a global pandemic. This seismic medical, social, economic and political crisis placed *time* centre stage. A changed relationship with the clock and the passage of time was not a uniform experience. Some people experienced the necessity to speed up in order to meet the urgent demands of the moment. Rapid decision-making was needed to source more medical equipment and to organise learning online. For many others time slowed, including those needing to protect their health. Time and its impact on us became hard to ignore.

Tipping point

The pandemic has created a 'stutter in the narrative' (Rose 1999) about every institution, raising questions about what it means to be a school, a university, an office, a shopping centre, church or mosque, particularly for those periods when many people were unable to gather. This has offered the possibility for rethinking essential purposes and how these link to values. This stutter, a break in a confident narrative, has resonance for education and early childhood education. This period of uncertainty may provide the opportunity to reassess what are the core purposes

of ECEC and to what extent long established values are represented in current practice. It is perhaps a tipping point. This book, I hope, may contribute to such a reassessment and provide questions and examples about what and how things could change. It is part of a series on Contesting Early Childhood that sets out to challenge dominant discourses in the field of early childhood education. This book does not promote one particular theoretical frame but looks at what theoretical and methodological approaches have been used and continue to emerge for slow pedagogies. The aim is to present complex ideas clearly in order to suggest creative alternatives that draw widely on international examples from within and beyond early childhood practice. The intention is not to present a naïve call to 'turn the clock back' to an ideal past but to promote discussion among the early childhood community about what different relationships with time in ECEC can look like and why such reflection is necessary.

Alison Clark
Orkney, Scotland
April 2022

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Many conversations have underpinned this book. My ideas have been deeply influenced by the children I have met through my earlier studies involving listening to young children, by the insights they have given and questions they have provoked about time, play, belonging and place. I am very grateful to everyone who has taken part in this research and in the discussions that came before and after. My special thanks to those interviewed (see Appendix) for their generous engagement with this theme and for being part of this collaborative thinking. Likewise, my thanks to Emma Clarkson, Karina Girvan, Donna Green, Grace Haines, Lorna Hill, Katie McCracken, Melanie O-Leary, Annette Ledger and Liz Turbitt for taking part in the focus group to discuss initial findings and to everyone who took part in the virtual reading group.

My thanks to my colleagues and to students at the University of South-Eastern Norway with whom this book has grown and taken shape

The generosity of The Froebel Trust has provided the opportunity to pursue this topic in depth. Their support has extended to hosting events and recording seminars. This has been invaluable in enabling wider access to the debate and to enable others to contribute their wisdom and creativity including Jo Albin-Clark, Sharon Colilles, Chris Pascal and Gemma Paterson who were speakers at the Urgency of Slow seminar to mark the end of the study.

My thanks to John Horton and Tracy Hayes for their workshop that reminded me writing is allowed to sometimes be enjoyable and to Agnes Bosanquet whose academic blog: 'Slow academic' accompanied me along the way.

I have benefitted from the generosity of my critical readers Karyn Callaghan and Margaret Carr and especially to Peter Moss for ongoing discussions and interest. Any errors of fact or judgement are mine alone.

My continued thanks to Jonathan who has lived with this book during lockdown and to the wonderful Ren for their timely support.

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PART 1

Reasons to be slow

Part 1 makes the case for the reasons to be slow in early childhood. This will look firstly at the pressures on ECEC to speed up, for children to be 'readied' for the next stage and to go for easily transmitted and captured 'fast knowledge' before exploring ways to think about slow knowledge in relation to young children.

Different approaches to time are introduced starting with 'clock time' and notions of 'wasted time' as applied to early childhood. This is followed by a discussion of the distinctive emphasis on 'play time' by investigating temporal dimensions to thinking about play including a historical perspective focusing on Froebelian approaches. This leads to alternative constructs for relating to time that can be applied to early childhood education including 'timefullness' (Swinton 2016); 'expansive time' (Povey et al. 2021); 'stretched time' (Cuffaro 1995) and 'whiling time' or 'worthwhile time' (Jardine 2008, 2012, 2013). Part 1 ends by building on these constructs to articulate definitions of slow pedagogies and slow knowledge.

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ACCELERATED CHILDHOOD

Introduction

This book grows out of an increasing concern about acceleration in education and in early childhood in particular. The need to 'run ever faster to maintain our place in the world' as expressed by the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2019: 415) is being felt across all sectors of education including Higher Education. I set out in these opening chapters to point to some of the signs of this acceleration before turning to alternative narratives that seek to reconsider the relationship with time, pace and rhythm in early childhood education.

I begin with taking Rosa as my guide and his observations about escalation and acceleration. Rosa in his book *Resonance* (2019) makes the case that modernity is based on a relationship to the world that has escalation at its core and links the compulsion to escalate with the drive to compete. He comments:

> I am concerned with the relationship to the world of a sociocultural formation that is capable of stabilizing itself only dynamically, i.e., that is dependent on systematic escalation in the dimension of economic growth, acceleration, and rates of innovation in order to reproduce its structure and maintain its formative status quo.
>
> *(Rosa 2019: 406)*

His critique of contemporary society has strong parallels with what has been happening in education and in early childhood education (ECEC). He continues:

> regardless of how successfully we live, work, and busy ourselves this year, individually and collectively, next year we will have to be a little faster, more efficient, more innovative, better, if we want to maintain our place in the

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> world – and the year after that the bar will be set a little bit higher. In fact, success, strength and efficiency in the present are directly proportional to the strength of the compulsion to escalate in the future.
>
> *(Rosa 2019: 407)*

The phrase 'bar set a little bit higher' – alerts us to the connection between speed and expected performance. We always have more to prove, more to measure, higher to jump.

Living in the shallows

Stephen Ball's critique of neoliberal education over several decades has drawn attention to the increasing need for children and educators to 'jump higher'.

> In regimes of performativity, experience is nothing, productivity is everything. Last year's efforts are a benchmark for this year's improvement – better exam and test results, more students going into higher education, more publications, more research grants. We must keep up; strive to achieve the new and ever more diverse targets which we set for ourselves in appraisal meetings; confess and confront our weaknesses; undertake appropriate and value-enhancing professional development; and take up opportunities for making ourselves more productive, ensuring what O'Flynn and Petersen (2007: 469) call a 'targeted self' or what Gee (1999: 46) refers to as the 'shape-shifting portfolio person.'
>
> *(Ball 2016: 1054)*

Performativity here is closely linked to productivity and measurable outcomes. Measurement can be seen to be the dominant discourse in neoliberalism that has had a profound impact on early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Moss 2019; Clark 2020; Brogaard Clausen et al. 2015; Robert-Holmes and Bradbury 2016; Vandenbrœck 2020; Robert-Holmes and Moss 2021). There is a temporal dimension to an emphasis on the easy to measure, as I have discussed in a chapter in *Transforming Early Childhood in England* (Cameron and Moss 2020) that paved the way for this research:

> Filling out a predefined checklist or baseline about what a child can do at any one moment in time can be far quicker to achieve than carrying out an in-depth observation or sitting and talking together. 'Saving time' can be an important factor in a professional culture where measurement dominates, especially when practitioners find themselves needing to collect a greater volume of standardised information about children, and at more frequent intervals. In a measurement culture what is measured matters (Volante 2018) and acquires increasing visibility.
>
> *(Clark 2020: 137)*

Gert Biesta draws attention to the link between the desire for acceleration within educational systems, the prevalence of performativity and the notion of impatience:

> I am inclined to argue that what we find here is predominantly an impatient look. Not only do we find a desire to put as much world as possible into the child or student. We also find a desire to do this as quickly and cheaply as possible, to constantly monitor and measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the operation, to make teachers' salaries dependent on the extent to which they succeed in producing pre-specified 'learning outcomes.'
>
> *(Biesta 2012: 99)*

This describes the overarching need to 'get there faster' which at the same time opens up the question of where is the destination; what is the purpose of education? Biesta takes up this challenge and argues persuasively for what he describes as the 'beautiful risk of education' (2013) that acknowledges the 'fundamental complexity and openness of all educational processes and practices' (2012: 99).

> All this suggests that the education of the will is a question of patience and perseverance, a process that needs time and attention. There is, in other words, no quick fix where it concerns the encounter with resistance and the ability to be 'in dialogue' with the world, with what is other and different.
>
> *(Biesta 2012: 98)*

Having time to be in dialogue 'with what is other and different' alerts us to the important dimensions to education that can be absent if the dominant regimes lead to us only skimming the surface of learning and relationships. Ball refers to this as depthlessness: 'The neo-liberal subject is malleable rather than committed, flexible rather than principled – essentially depthless' (Ball 2010: 126). Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021: 90–117) consider the consequences of 'neoliberal imagery' on how young children, parents and early childhood centres are viewed:

> The image of the 'poor' child, a reproducer of knowledge, values and identity, and yet to be realised human capital; the image of the parent as consumer and realised human capital seeking to achieve and maintain the best returns on the capital; the image of the early childhood centre as business and as factory or processing plant, a site for investing in the efficient achievement of certain outcomes, the first stage in the development of human capital and readying the child for the next stage, compulsory primary schooling.
>
> *(2021: 106)*

The roles of early childhood 'workers' or educators if viewed in this way become 'competent technicians' (Osgood 2009) or 'economic custodians' (Robert-Holmes and Moss 2021: 109).