

(D)EVALUATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE?

A CRITIQUE OF THE OECD'S INTERNATIONAL EARLY LEARNING STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter I present a summary of critical arguments concerning the *International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study* (IELS) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). IELS is a standardised assessment of preschool children for the purpose of international comparison. It is modelled on similar standardised assessments conducted by the OECD, most prominently PISA, the *Programme for International Student Assessment* of 15-year olds. IELS has drawn critique from international scholars for its democratic deficit, ethical and methodological flaws, political naivety, and general inappropriateness for the evaluation of complex systems such as early childhood education and care. The chapter is based on a presentation I gave as part of the *Quality of Childhood* (QoC) talks at the European Parliament in Brussels in June 2017.

Keywords: early childhood education; competent systems; evaluation; assessment; OECD; International Early Learning Study

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, a necessary positioning: I am not against evaluation or comparative international research in early childhood development, education and care. On the contrary, I find myself in the company of colleagues, collaborators and co-authors from many countries that have consistently argued for a nuanced enquiry into the cultures, understandings, concepts, structures of early childhood systems. An enquiry that is respectful of children's rights, welcoming of diversity and complexity, and inclusive of the field's multiple perspectives. It is a position that values approaches to comparative study that provokes thought and dialogue, and engages a wide range of diverse stakeholders – including children, families and practitioners – in democratically meaningful and accountable ways.

What might appear an odd opening statement to make has become, I am afraid, a necessity in a climate that appears to be increasingly characterised by a lack of critical argument and openness to different positions. Most of the argument I outline in this chapter originates from a collective attempt by a growing group of international scholars to get the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to engage in a transparent process and scholarly and democratic debate about one of its current endeavours, the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS). The chapter itself is a follow up on the first quasi-public debate about IELS at an event hosted by the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group as part of the *Quality of Childhood* (QoC) series of talks at the European Parliament in Brussels on 20th June 2017¹. Rowena Phair, IELS project leader for the OECD presented the project to an invited audience; I responded and outlined what others and I see as issues of concern around the approach taken by the OECD. At the time of writing this chapter, at the end of 2017, IELS has progressed from a proposal to a project, which is now well underway. Contractors have been commissioned, instruments developed, and the collection of data has begun.

WHAT IS IELTS?

As an international organisation committed to promoting economic growth the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development might seem an unlikely candidate to assess the practices of early childhood education at a local level. But the OECD has an established history of showing an interest in the education systems of its member states. This interest has manifested itself most prominently in a series of international standardised test for 15 year olds – the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) and the global angst its rankings and league tables has created. How does your country's school system fare in relation to Finland or South Korea (in all due respect to Finnish and South Korean readers of this piece)?

In 2015, the OECD announced the launch of an international standardised assessment programme for five-year-old children, the *International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study* (IELS). According to the IELS website (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>) the programme will assess four 'early learning domains' (emerging literacy, emerging numeracy, self-regulation, empathy and trust). Assessing each domain, we learn, will take 'approximately 15 minutes' using a 'tablet-based' test. Further 'indirect assessment of children's skills will be obtained from parents and staff through written and online questionnaires'. Additional information will be provided by 'the study administrators (sic) observations'. An international consortium has been contracted to administer the study, consisting of the *Australian Council for Educational Research* (ACER)², the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IEA)³, and *cApStAn*⁴, and a timeline has been announced: the study will go ahead in the 'Northern Hemisphere' in 2018, the 'Southern Hemisphere' in 2019, followed by 'quality control and analysis' and a 'report' in 2019–2020.

However, sweeping reference to the study being rolled out globally has to be put into perspective, at least for the time being. At the time of writing, only the United States, England (NOT the United Kingdom, as Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are not taking part) and Estonia have confirmed their participation in IELS. Many other countries, including Germany, France, New Zealand, Japan and Belgium, have withdrawn. Some countries (e.g. Germany, Japan and New Zealand) have provided explicit statements as to why they consider the OECD approach to be incompatible with the philosophy and practice of early childhood education and care in these countries. I will come back to this. Already at this early stage, a sample of three countries, which include two of the worst and most underdeveloped early childhood systems in the so-called developed world (England and US) deserves critical interrogation: 'to what possible question is test scores for England, Estonia and US the answer?' (Moss & Urban, 2018).

Between 2015 (the year of the first announcement and the publication of a call for tender) and 2017 (the project start date) the information published on the IELS website has changed substantially. Earlier announcements of a pilot (which could have been evaluated) were removed, and the title of the study was changed from the original *International Early Learning Study* to

International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study. However, the acronym remains the same (IELS) and there is only fleeting reference to well-being on the website and accompanying documents.

So far, the initiative has largely escaped public attention. Despite the OECD having consulted with government representatives of 16 countries in a 'scoping group' since 2012, little to no information about the initiative has been shared with the international early childhood community. The lack of information and absence of any meaningful consultation with early childhood professionals and scholars has been repeatedly pointed out. An article published in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* (CIEC) by Peter Moss and co-authors in August 2016 was the first to ask 'Did you know about this?' (Moss et al., 2016). Until today, based on my own and my colleagues' experiences from talking with practitioners in many countries, the answer is a resounding 'no'. Several publications have expressed concerns about IELS, its underlying assumptions, the process, and the implications – for young children as well as for the early childhood profession. Shortly after Moss' article in CIEC, Beth Blue Swadener (Arizona State University) and I published a paper titled *Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation*. The piece was published in *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies* (Urban & Swadener, 2016) and on the website of the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education (RECE) network (receinternational.org) and signed in support by nearly 200 academics, professionals and activists from over 20 countries. Other critical publications in various national and international contexts followed, e.g. Alan Pence's *Baby PISA* (Pence, 2017) and Margaret Carr, Linda Mitchell and Lesley Rameka's piece on IELS and Te Whāriki (Carr, Mitchell and Rameka, 2016; Mackey, Hill and de Vocht, 2016). There is an update on recent developments in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* (Moss & Urban, 2017). In this chapter, and based on my presentation at the European Parliament in June 2017 I summarise the key arguments of these contributions.

YOUNG CHILDREN, STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT, AND THE PROBLEM WITH INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

One of the key methodological concerns about IELS is its apparent disregard for any evidence that suggests caution is appropriate when using standardised testing of young children for international comparative purposes. In the US, a country with an established history of high-stakes testing, studies consistently show the low reliability and validity of standardised tests of children, especially in contexts of large-scale comparison (Meisels, 2004, 2006; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Madaus & Clarke, 2001; Raudenbush, 2005). Referring to these arguments we have argued that the findings from IELS will be 'largely meaningless due to their disconnect with and disrespect for diverse, locally embedded approaches to early childhood education and care' (Urban & Swadener, 2016, pp 7,8). While the collection of child-based data on a global scale, in order to produce PISA style country rankings and league tables raises serious ethical questions (see below) it also points to other critical aspects of IELS. Not least that it is a waste of resources and a missed opportunity as it will draw attention away from meaningful local and international initiatives to create in-depth understandings of complex early childhood systems, develop

meaningful systemic evaluation and support the much-needed improvement of experiences and outcomes for all children.

The OECD must be aware of the existing meta-analyses of standardised test results of young children. That it keeps pushing ahead regardless leads us, in our 2016 article written on behalf of the *Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education* network, to ask whose interests are served by rolling out IELS:

Promoting and rolling out standardised assessment and comparison approaches regardless of overwhelming evidence that they cannot achieve their stated goals raises the question whether political and corporate profit interests are being privileged over valid research, children's rights and meaningful evaluation.

(Urban & Swadener, 2016, p. 7)

IELS'S DISREGARD FOR DIVERSITY AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

IELS in itself is not the problem. Or, more specifically, it is only a small aspect of a much bigger global problem. As we have pointed out repeatedly, IELS is another step towards drawing early childhood into a global standardised assessment framework whose proponents appear unable (or unwilling!) to see children's experiences in the education system through any lens other than the one provided by PISA. The OECD is open about the connection. The IELS 'Call for Tenders' states that information gathered from children at preschool age will eventually

provide information on the trajectory between early learning outcomes and those at age 15, as measured by PISA. In this way, countries can have an earlier and more specific indication of how to lift the skills and other capabilities of its young people.

(OECD, 2015, p. 103)

What is stated here as an intention for the future has immediate consequences today. This is evident, for example, in a recent e-mail exchange with a colleague in a country that has become of interest to the OECD. Both the country and the colleague shall not be named in this piece. What can be said is that the country in question has recently adopted a highly ambitious integrated policy framework for early childhood, based on a holistic and rights-based understanding of public responsibility for all young children. A meeting was called by the country's Ministry of Education, to discuss the direction of education policies with a delegation from the OECD. At that meeting it was made clear that the country's commitment to holistic child development should be abandoned, and resources focused on improving the country's PISA score instead:

Dear Mathias

[XXXX] is trying to be accepted by OECD. They did a study about education in [XXXX].

They presented as results [...] the big gap of [XXXX]ian children related to other countries.

They insisted a lot that the study demonstrated that children are not learning what they need because their performance was very low.

*[...] The key issue is the discussion between Human development vs. scholarly objectives related to meeting international standards.
In the background all is about PISA's test and [XXXX]ian results in order to be accepted in OECD*

*[...] they argue that **children are wasting time with play, arts and literature.***
(Personal communication, 2017, my emphasis)

The commitment to ensuring that children in participating countries no longer engage in 'wasteful activities' like play is only one, albeit striking, example of its disregard for the diversity of possible approaches to culturally embedded educational and child rearing practices. The United Nations Declaration of the rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIPS) explicitly recognises the right of Indigenous Peoples to diversity and to education 'in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning' (Article 14), and to 'dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information' (Article 15).

Initially, the OECD's tunnel vision was also evident at an operational level. According to the original version of the IELS website (accessed in September 2017), children's perspectives were only to be sought *after* the tests had been completed. Children were going to be asked

if they liked the assessment activity, its content and different aspects. These debriefing sessions will be used to ensure children's well-being during the assessment but also to provide valuable feedback about the assessment material and procedures. In addition, children will be asked about their favourite learning activities in different settings.
(<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>)

Apart from this post facto assessment, there was no indication of any intention to engage with children *before* the test. There was no indication that children's (or practitioners') consent to participate in IELS would be sought. To base a research project on *assumed* (instead of *informed*) consent would be met with astonishment – and rejection – by any university ethics committee, as any research student will know. The OECD seemed to have exempted themselves from such standards.

However, following my presentation at the European Parliament in June 2016, after our published critique, and a follow-up discussion at the national advisory board for IELS England, the wording on the OECD website was slightly amended. It has now added a phrase that states that the test will be 'delivered' [...] 'once parental consent is obtained'. There is still no indication that children (who are clearly research participants in the study) will be asked for consent, or informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without having to give a reason.

The OECD did not announce this change in its approach. My enquiry, in writing, whether parental consent had been sought for the first round of data collection (November 2017), remains unanswered to date.

SELECTIVE USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE

As Moss et al (2016) and others have pointed out, the OECD has chosen to take a highly selective approach to evidence that informs the field of early childhood at an international level.

The Organisation adopts a particular paradigmatic position which might be described as hyper-positivistic... the OECD is free to choose its position. However, it should be aware that it has made a choice and taken a particular perspective. It should also be aware that there are other choices and other perspectives. Yet on both counts it shows a total lack of self-awareness (Moss et al., 2016, p. 346)

This undeclared paradigmatic position persistently denies that other positions exist, and that they have indeed existed for many years. Over the past 25 years reconceptualist scholars have contributed to a rapidly growing body of research and knowledge that offers alternative – postcolonial, critical, feminist, indigenous, transdisciplinary – understandings of what it means to educate and care for young children: ‘Such research and knowledge is rendered invisible by OECD, its existence not even acknowledged’ (Moss & Urban, 2017).

More specifically, as Moss et al (2016) remind us, the OECD chooses not to engage with any scholarship critical of PISA. Critical points raised by Morris (2016), Alexander (2010, 2012) and others are similarly relevant to testing 5 year olds for international comparison. ‘National education systems’, Robin Alexander (2012) reminds us, ‘are embedded in national culture’. Which explains why ‘no educational policy or practice can be properly understood except by reference to the web of inherited ideas and values, habits and customs, institutions and world views, that make one country distinct from another’ (p. 5). Similar arguments have been made by the OECD itself in the first two Starting Strong reports (OECD, 2001, 2006):

ECEC policy and the quality of services are deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff? (OECD, 2001, p. 63)

NAÏVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF POLICY LEARNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

If governance theory has shown one thing it is this: no one does as they are told. Ever. That top-down implementation of policies doesn't work has been at the centre of research into the governance of complex systems (such as education systems) for many years. An early reference can be found in the classic paper by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984): *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland*. However, the entire OECD

operation seems firmly grounded in an unshakeable belief that it is possible to transfer policies from one context (country, culture) to another, and to implement them without distortion. The naivety of this 'implied model of enlightened policymakers objectively and rationally applying lessons from other countries' (Moss et al, 2016) has been pointed out by Paul Morris (2016). But even a model that doesn't work in the first place can be (ab)used for other purposes. As Morris notes there is a

wholly unsurprising tendency for policymakers to view such comparative data on pupil performance as an expedient resource, which serves a primarily symbolic role in the theatre of politics and provides a massive source of evidence, from which they can hunt for correlations to legitimize their own ideological preferences. (Morris, 2016, p. 11)

The 'great expectations' nurtured by the OECD in relation to IELS are being 'dashed' already in many countries – as they refuse to take part in the initiative. Critical statements have been published in New Zealand, Japan, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Belgium and the UK, drawing on our arguments (Moss et al, 2016; Urban & Swadener, 2016; Moss & Urban, 2017) and building resistance among scholars, professionals and activists. An international critical coalition has formed and is carrying the argument forward.

THERE ARE ALTERNATIVES TO THE 'DICTATORSHIP OF NO ALTERNATIVES'

At a meeting at the OECD headquarters in Paris in February 2017, to discuss IELS with the project team, Peter Moss and I were asked if we were opposed to quantitative methods (hence my 'necessary positioning' at the beginning of this chapter). This, of course, is a) not the case and b) not the point. What we are opposed to, when it comes to evaluating the workings of complex, diverse, and culturally embedded support systems for young children and their families, is to be told that there is no alternative to standardised assessment and decontextualised measurement. We are strongly supportive of evaluation – not least as a way of holding governments and ourselves to account. We are also convinced of the importance of learning *with* and *from* others in international contexts. The OECD itself has shown that such approaches are possible. The landmark *Starting Strong I+II* studies (2001, 2006) are examples of a carefully designed and conducted exploration of early childhood systems in 20 countries, based on respect for diversity.

My own international work (as that of many others) draws on the leadership provided by John Bennett and his co-authors in *Starting Strong I+II*. What we have come to understand is that early childhood care, education and development services and practices are at their best when they are developed and supported as part of a *Competent System* (Urban, 2012; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012; Vandenbroeck, Urban, & Peeters, 2016). There are alternatives to IELS in its current form and I have no doubt that the international early childhood community would be supportive of a meaningful, contextualised learning initiative, conducted in respectful and participatory ways.

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BIOGRAPHY

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Before joining DCU Mathias held the position of Froebel Professor of Early Childhood Studies and Director of the Early Childhood Research Centre at the University of Roehampton, London, United Kingdom.

From 2010 to 2011 he coordinated the European CoRe project (*Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*). His current and recent projects include collaborative studies on early childhood professionalism in Colombia (*Sistemas Competentes para la Atención Integral a la Primera Infancia*), studies on *Privatisation* and on the impact of *Assessment Regimes*, and an 11-country project on *Governance and Leadership for Competent Systems in Early Childhood*. Mathias is an International Research Fellow with the Critical Childhood Public Policy Research Collaborative, a member of the PILIS research group (*Primera Infancia, Lenguaje e Inclusión Social*), Chair of the DECET network (*Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training*), a member of the AERA special interest group *critical perspectives on early childhood education*. Mathias is the President of the International Froebel Society (IFS).

ENDNOTES

- 1 This chapter is partly based on a shorter piece published by the author in *Global Education Review* in 2017 (Urban, 2017).
- 2 ACER is an 'independent, not-for-profit research organisation'; its mission is 'to create and promote research-based knowledge, products and services that can be used to improve learning across the lifespan' (www.acer.org). ACER led the management of PISA in 2006 and 2009.
- 3 IEA is a Netherlands-based 'international cooperative of national research institutions, government research agencies, scholars and analysts working to evaluate, understand and improve education worldwide' (www.iea.nl). IEA has a long history of providing international comparative assessments in education, including the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).
- 4 cApStAn is a Belgium-based company that provides 'linguistic quality control' for multilingual projects (www.capstan.be). The company has been involved in PISA since 1998.