

Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation

Learning with and from each other
in Early Childhood Development, Care and Education
in international contexts

THE PROS AND CONS OF OECD'S INTERNATIONAL EARLY LEARNING STUDY (IELS)
Working Group on the Quality of Childhood at the European Parliament
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IFS: THE INTERNATIONAL FROEBEL SOCIETY
Promoting Child-Centred Kindergarten & Early Education Worldwide



‘Pro’ or ‘con’ *Evaluation and data?*
That is not the point

We are not ‘against evaluation’. On the contrary, we strongly support learning with and from each other in international contexts. However:

The IELS, for us, is not just a concern; it is a wasted opportunity. We want to see further comparative studies of ECEC, but studies that adopt an approach that is respectful of diversity, welcoming of complexity, inclusive of the field’s multiple perspectives and provoking of thought.

(Moss & Urban, 2017)

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)

The global context for IELS

A global rush to standardised testing across all age groups:

IELS, PISA, PISA for Development, AHELO, MELQO...

In time, the information can also 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)

Main areas of concern

Expressed by early childhood scholars, professionals and activists around the globe

(Urban & Swadener, 2016; Moss et al, 2016; Urban & Moss, 2017; Carr, Mitchell & Rameka, 2016; Pence, 2017)

www.receinternational.org

1. Lack of information, transparency, participation and accountability
2. Misuse of standardised assessment of young children for the purpose of international comparison and ranking
3. Disregard for children's rights, the rights of diverse communities, and ethical concerns about the proposed procedure
4. Selective use of research 'evidence', general disregard for critical research, and a naïve belief in policy learning
5. Dominance of corporate profit interests

1. Lack of information, transparency, participation and accountability

Through its powerful ‘human technologies’, its creation of ‘epistemic communities of policy analysts, bureaucrats and politicians within the Organisation and in member countries’ (Sellar and Lingard, 2013: 712), and its global reach, OECD exercises enormous ‘soft power’. Yet the responsibilities and dangers of this unaccountable power are not acknowledged.

The evolution of IELS, going back to 2012, has been shrouded in secrecy; few people in the early childhood community knew of its existence even when the project was on the verge of implementation.

Still no (confirmed) information about participating countries (although we know that an increasing number of countries are withdrawing)



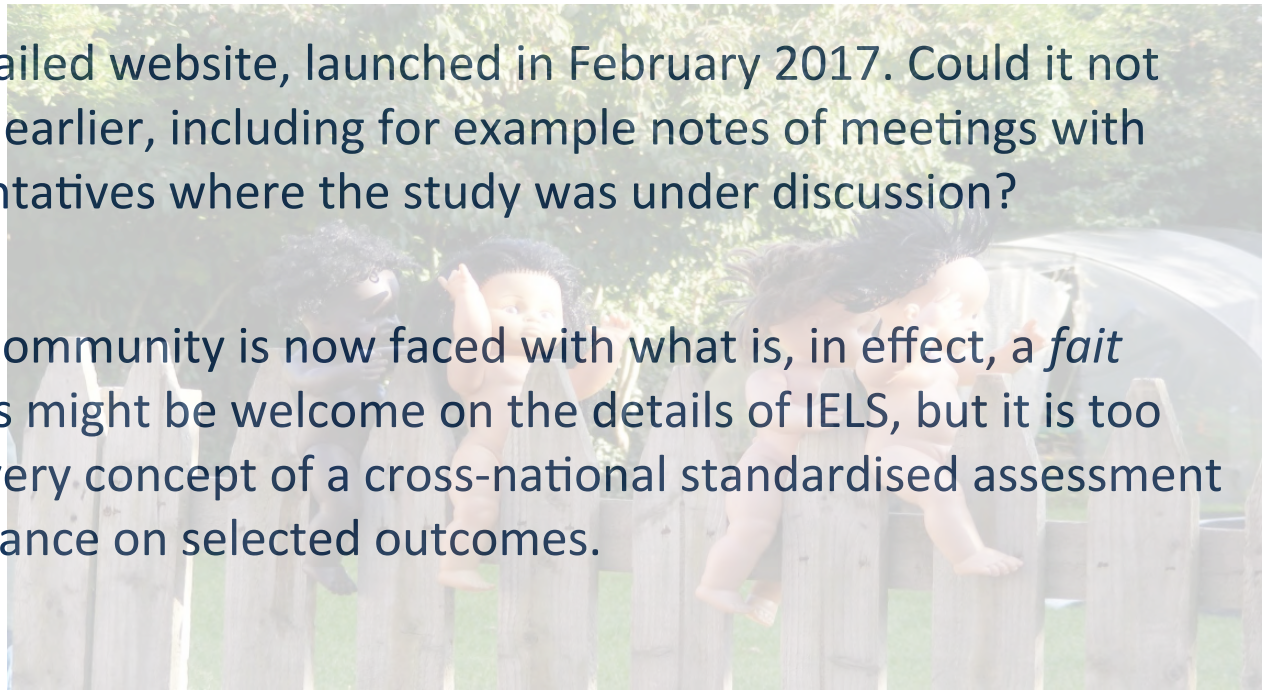
1. Lack of information, transparency, participation and accountability

OECD says that informing and consulting more widely about this project is the responsibility of member state governments, yet few seem to have done so. OECD cannot entirely wash its hands of the matter.

It now has a very detailed website, launched in February 2017. Could it not have done this much earlier, including for example notes of meetings with government representatives where the study was under discussion?

The early childhood community is now faced with what is, in effect, a *fait accompli* – comments might be welcome on the details of IELS, but it is too late to question the very concept of a cross-national standardised assessment of children's performance on selected outcomes.

(Moss and Urban, 2017)



2. Misuse of standardised assessment of young children for the purpose of international comparison and ranking

There is ample evidence of the low reliability and validity of standardised tests of children (as young as 5), especially in contexts of large-scale comparison (Meisels, 2004, 2006; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Madaus & Clarke, 2001; Raudenbush, 2005).

If the data collected in such exercises is used for producing international comparison and country league tables, it is rendered meaningless. As Margaret Carr (New Zealand) and co-authors remind us:

to fairly and truly judge what a person can do, you need to know how the talent (skill, knowledge) you are assessing is situated in – placed within – the lived social practices of the person as well as his or her interpretations of those practices

[...] many a standardized test can be perfectly 'scientific' and useless at the same time; in a worst case scenario, it can be disastrous. (Gee, 2007: 364)

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.

3. Disregard for children's rights, the rights of diverse communities and ethical concerns about the proposed procedure

Authors have pointed out that IELTS (and indeed other international standardised tests) are grounded in a narrow 'western' concept of the child, and a technical rather than holistic understanding of education. There is little consideration for a diversity of approaches, worldviews and childrearing practices:

the recognition of minority groups and indigenous peoples in OECD countries and beyond. 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). Despite these rights the present OECD initiative intersects and overshadows countries' own approaches to conceptualising, framing and evaluating early childhood education and care practices.

(Urban and Swadener, 2016)

3. Disregard for children's rights, the rights of diverse communities and ethical concerns about the proposed procedure

At a practical level, there is no indication that the consent of children (or families and practitioners) to take part in the study will be sought. Instead, they will be asked – post-fact – ‘if they liked the assessment activity, its content and different aspects’.

Earlier indication of a ‘pilot’ that would have allowed for careful evaluation and subsequent change of approach have been taken off the website.



4. Selective use of research ‘evidence’, general disregard for critical research, and a naïve belief in policy learning

There is a general unwillingness, displayed consistently by the OECD, to engage with the well-developed body of critical arguments and research in relation to PISA and its affiliated studies.

Over the past 25 years reconceptualist scholars have contributed to a rapidly growing body of research and knowledge that offer alternative – postcolonial, critical, feminist, indigenous, transdisciplinary – understandings of what it means to educate and care for young children (Swadener and Urban, 2016: 7)

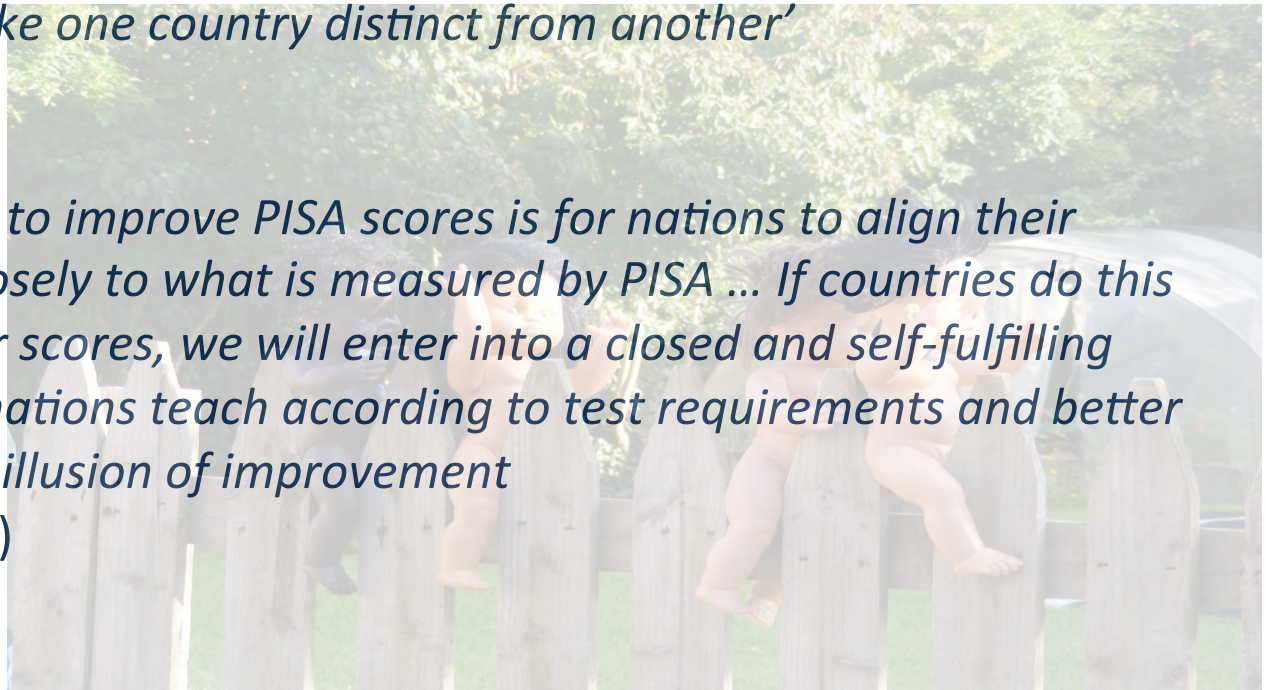
Such research and knowledge is rendered invisible by OECD, its existence not even acknowledged.



4. Selective use of research ‘evidence’,
general disregard for critical research,
and a naïve belief in policy learning

National education systems are embedded in national culture...[so that] 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’
(Alexander, 2012: 5)

The simplest way to improve PISA scores is for nations to align their curricula more closely to what is measured by PISA ... If countries do this and improve their scores, we will enter into a closed and self-fulfilling system in which nations teach according to test requirements and better scores create the illusion of improvement
(Morris, 2016: 26)



5. Dominance of corporate profit interests

PISA was initially undertaken by international consortia of professional organizations. This is now changing. In 2013, McGraw-Hill Education, the giant textbook and testing company, was awarded the contract for administering tests in the USA; while in 2014, OECD awarded the contract for developing the frameworks for PISA 2018 to Pearson, the largest education company in the world (Unwin and Yandell, 2016).

Concerns are that IELS will contribute to further opening the door to international for-profit corporations extending their reach into early childhood:

if not by intention then by design, the current international initiatives for standardised assessment contribute to opening public education sectors to corporate profit interests and to channelling scarce resources from the public sphere to private, corporate profit (Urban and Swadener, 2016: 5)

Partners forming the international contractor for IELS (ACER, IEA, cApStAn) have been widely involved in PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS

There are alternatives!

We would like OECD and other partners to...

- jointly develop carefully designed international comparative studies of early childhood development, education and care *systems*
- focus on supporting *Competent Systems* (Urban, Vandenbroeck et al, 2011, 2012) rather than standardised test regimes
- build on the approach taken by OECD in the landmark studies *Starting Strong I+II*
- engage a wide range of diverse stakeholders in democratically meaningful and accountable ways
- initiate alternative, internationally AND locally meaningful learning with and from each other:

respectful of diversity and children's rights
welcoming of complexity
inclusive of the field's multiple perspectives

Thank you!

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