

Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation

A comment on the OECD initiative to launch an International Early Learning Study (IELS)

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Abstract

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has initiated a process to develop and pilot an international comparative assessment of learning outcomes for young children aged 4.5 to 5.5 years. The *International Early Learning Study* (IELS) has received little attention from early childhood scholars and practitioners due not least to the absence of a meaningful consultation process. In this paper, written on behalf of the international Reconceptualising Early Childhood (RECE) network, we argue that research evidence that draws large-scale standardised assessment and comparison of young children into question is not taken into account by the proponents of IELS. We express our concern that IELS confirms the OECD's renunciation of the more contextually sensitive approach to understanding early childhood systems that underpinned earlier studies, in particular Starting Strong I+II. We argue that emerging resistance from the field against decontextualized standardised assessment of children, and the nature of the information gathered will render IELS results largely meaningless for the stated purpose of improving early childhood experiences for all children. The paper concludes with a call for supporting *competent systems*, democratic accountability and systemic evaluation.

Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has a long tradition of providing data and policy advice in early childhood education (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2009). The Starting Strong I+II studies, in particular (OECD, 2001, 2006), are considered landmark research in the field and have contributed hugely to a better understanding of the policy choices available to countries faced with the task of developing and improving their early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in order to achieve more equitable and just outcomes for all children and families, as well as for the wider society.

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Building on these studies the OECD is now in the early stages of developing and piloting an international assessment of early learning outcomes – the International Early Learning Study (IELS). While we are convinced that international collaboration and joint learning with and from the diversity of experiences in early childhood systems around the world is necessary, we are concerned that joint learning at the international level is increasingly replaced by universal standardised assessment of children, decontextualized comparisons, and, as a consequence, ranking of countries.

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

As members of the international and interdisciplinary movement *Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education* (www.receinternational.org), representing scholars, senior academic researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in over 25 nations, we outline our shared concerns, counter arguments, and our offer for collaboration in this statement.

About RECE

The *Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education* (RECE) movement gained momentum in the 1980s with conversations among scholars around the world who were concerned about the dominance of a narrow interpretation of developmental psychology and child development theory, and who drew from an array of more critical, feminist, postcolonial, postmodern and Indigenous perspectives in their work. Such reconceptualist scholars, like those in other fields, question the belief that scientific truths could be ‘discovered’ about any individual or group of children and then applied to all children, no matter the culture, language, belief structure, or physical life circumstances. In other words, the early work from reconceptualists in our field questioned the promotion of universal prescriptions for ‘best practice’ and other ‘grand narratives’, which continue to dominate our field.

As an international community coming from a wide range of disciplines and professions, we share a concern about privileging particular sets of beliefs or forms of knowledge that typically reflect western or Eurocentric traditions and values. Historically, on a global scale, the privilege of western onto-epistemologies (*ways of knowing, doing, and being*) have created power for certain groups of people, and continue to oppress others.

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.

Several publishing companies devote an entire series to reconceptualizing early childhood education scholarship (Peter Lang, Routledge, Palgrave-Macmillan and others) and many of us have published in a range of journals and implemented various forms of critical practice

in education and public policy work (Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, 2014. See more examples in the bibliography at the end of this paper).

Reconceptualist scholarship has been shared at annual international conferences since 1991, with conferences held in locations across the United States and in Australia, Norway, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Palestine, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Kenya and Canada, regularly drawing participants from over 20 countries on all continents. Reconceptualist scholarship and research has taken a prominent place in other academic forums, too. This includes the Special Interest Group *'critical perspectives on early childhood'* within the *American Educational Research Association (AERA)* and the *Comparative and International Education Society (CIES)*. We write this statement as part of the proceedings of the 24th international RECE conference, Taupo, Aotearoa New Zealand, 30 October – 3 November 2016.

The need for critical inquiry, democratic accountability and contextualised, systemic evaluation

Much of our argument about diversity, inter- and trans-disciplinarity, and multiple stakeholder perspectives as the basis for in-depth understandings of early childhood practices, policies and systems in complex socio-cultural contexts resonates with the OECD's own understanding, as outlined in the first two *Starting Strong* studies that, as Penn (2011, p. 83) states, have become a 'reference point for all policy makers everywhere' (Penn, 2011, p. 83).

The OECD's own approach to investigating, documenting and comparing early childhood systems has been underpinned by the notion that

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)

In consequence, *Starting Strong II* concludes by proposing a set of ten policy areas 'for consideration by governments and the major ECEC stakeholders' (OECD, 2006, pp. 205-220; Urban, 2015b)

1. To attend to the social context of early childhood development
2. To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies
3. To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance
4. To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services
5. To base public funding estimates on achieving quality pedagogical goals
6. To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights
7. To encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services

8. To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff
9. To provide autonomy, funding and support to early childhood services
10. To aspire toward ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy

These ten areas outline a comprehensive and systemic approach to developing policies and practices for young children, their families and communities. They take into account the social, cultural, economic and political context of early childhood systems and the complexity and diversity of countries' histories that inevitably shape their institutions and shared understandings of what 'quality' in early childhood means and how it can and cannot be developed.

There can be no one-size-fits-all approach to understanding and evaluating the quality of early childhood services (Meisels, 2006; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006; Urban, 2015b). Instead, the complexity of the task, especially when the international dimension is added to the local picture, calls for broad and meaningful consultation and democratic debate with all stakeholders at local, national and international level.

Decontextualised comparison and preschool PISA instead?

Comparison is a grand epistemological strategy, a powerful conceptual mechanism, fixing attention upon one or a few attributes. [... However, it] obscures case knowledge that fails to facilitate comparison
(Stake, 2003, p. 148)

Instead of careful, culturally and contextually appropriate consideration of the achievements of early childhood systems in diverse countries, and of systemic evaluation of the actual outcomes for children, families and society, IELS appears to adopt a strategy that favours largely decontextualised comparison and measurement of narrowly defined predetermined outcomes. It is our concern that such an approach will not provide necessary or meaningful information for decision makers and early childhood leaders in participating countries and beyond. What it will do is draw early childhood education firmly into a global framework of standardised assessment across all tiers of the education system, from early childhood to higher education. As the 'Call for Tenders' for IELS specifies, the information gathered 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)

A persistent criticism of such league table approaches is that they lend themselves to oversimplification and ignore the reality that different cultural traditions and socio-cultural contexts produce different paradigms, particularly in education. As Alexander (2000) states with the British example in mind:

[...] international comparison offered policy makers the tempting prospect of both plausible explanations and viable solutions. The explanations tended to be mono-causal and linear, and to jump incautiously from correlation to causality. Thus, with international league tables of both economic and educational performance now conveniently available, it was assumed that a country's position on one was determined by its position on the other. [...] The solution was clear: adopt strategies that would raise the average test scores of British children, and Britain's economic future would be assured.

(Alexander, 2000, p. 41)

A further matter of concern is that comparative studies across complex international and cultural contexts inevitably lose sight of the messy, complex, unique – and therefore crucially important – aspects of educational practices. Methodological decisions aimed at keeping comparison manageable contribute to shifting the focus of interest, perhaps involuntarily, from the 'thick of what is going on' (Stake, 2003, p. 148) to the comparison itself.

We see such an approach as diametrically opposed to the need for creating better understandings (Schwandt, 2004) of early childhood systems and their contribution to the well-being of all children, and are convinced that IELS as it is currently conceptualised – a pre-school PISA in all but name (Moss et al., 2016) – is not going to provide a meaningful basis for achieving more just and equitable outcomes for children, families, and the wider community. Resources will be diverted from much needed local and national improvement processes to creating a largely meaningless international league table instead.

Beyond IELS: the global context for standardised assessment of predetermined outcomes

We are aware and concerned, as well, about the increasing entanglement between standardised assessment as central part of the agendas and strategies of influential global agents in education and corporate interests, especially, but not limited to, the Global South. We see this entanglement reflected in the changing approach to developing and administering standardised assessment, including PISA:

[...] PISA is changing – and changing in a way that both mirrors and facilitates the neoliberal mania for privatization. In the early years of PISA, test design, data collection and analysis were all entrusted to international consortia of professional organizations. In 2013, the OECD awarded the contract for the administration of their tests in the US to McGraw-Hill Education, the giant textbook and testing company. In 2014, however, the OECD gave the contract for developing the frameworks for PISA 2018 to Pearson, the largest education company in the world: Pearson will determine what is to be tested and how.

(Unwin & Yandell, 2016, p. 43)

Pearson, they continue to explain, is using its global position to 'simultaneously [influence] educational policy and providing solutions for the problems which it identifies (and thus creating opportunities for further profit-making interventions)' (ibid). It is becoming ever more

clear that the global frameworks for standardised assessment, of which IELTS will become an inextricable part if it goes ahead, are neither designed to serve and inform democratic policy-making nor to support contextually appropriate improvement of educational practices and equitable outcomes for all children. On the contrary, they are designed to deflect attention from the need for democratically legitimate, local, and systemic development of policies, practices and evaluation approaches. 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 profit⁴.

Searching for alternative approaches

In some of the 16 countries that took part in ‘scoping’ IELTS⁵ initiatives from the early childhood field, together with critical scholars and organisations in civil society, have begun to voice their concerns and organise resistance against the approach. In Germany, for example, a coalition of national organisations that include service providers, trade unions, parents’ organisations and research have published a statement bringing together critical arguments against Germany’s participation in IELTS. The authors build their case on the lack of recognition of children’s rights, diversity, and socio-cultural contextualisation of early childhood practices in the OECD approach. Crucial elements that underpin early childhood practices in any country, they suggest, are given up in order to enable international comparison and ranking. The detailed critique voiced from within the German early childhood community echoes our argument that IELTS abandons meaningful contextualised evaluation in order to create *comparability*, which, in turn renders possible findings largely meaningless.

[...] the signees fear the planned standardization will pay too little attention to each child’s specific rights and needs, disregarding them in order to adopt an “effective” methodology capable of generating findings that can be used for cost-benefit analyses. A study structured in this manner would be at odds with the educational standards of inclusion and diversity that German practice explicitly adheres to.

(Pestalozzi-Fröbel Verband & Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Elterninitiativen, 2016, cover letter)

Critical questions are being raised in a number of other countries, too. At the time of our writing this statement they include (not an exhaustive list):

- An initiative launched by the Finnish *Haukkala Foundation* to protect well-being and children’s rights as the foundation of early childhood policy and practice in Finland

⁴ A visit of the website that publishes the call for tender for the IELTS pilot in the US provides revealing insight into the values that guide the initiative: IELTS is presented as a ‘business opportunity’ by the US government (<https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=f1f768686c6d0a656582efc61e23b3ad&tab=core&cvview=0>). Revealing, too, is the fact that item 5 of the tender document specifies that ‘expert help’ in developing and piloting IELTS is ‘optional’.

⁵ Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Lithuania, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Turkey, the UK, the USA and Wales (UK).

- An initiative by the *Alliance for Childhood* at the European Parliament taking a stand against standardisation and privatisation of early childhood education and care in the EU
- A critical statement currently being developed by PLÉ, the National Association of Higher Education Institutions Offering Degree Level Training in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland
- A detailed argument against the participation of New Zealand in IELS on grounds of its inappropriateness for evaluating the highly culturally contextualised early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*, written by leading New Zealand early childhood scholars Carr, Mitchell and Rameka
- We are aware of further position papers, responses and statements currently being developed by a range of international early childhood organisations including DECET (Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Education and Training / www.decet.org) and the International Froebel Society (IFS).

Meaningful consultation, active engagement, and respect for diversity and rights

The overall picture that is beginning to emerge is that early childhood professionals, scholars, and activists in many countries are urging their governments not to take part in IELS because of its disregard for the diverse histories, practices, understandings and values of childrearing and early care and education.

As Moss et al. (2016) remind us, debate about the proposed International Early Learning Study has not reached practitioners, parents and policy makers beyond the immediate group of country representatives at the OECD Starting Strong network. For an initiative aspiring to have direct impact on the practices of potentially all early childhood services in and beyond the participating countries, this woeful lack of information and consultation is entirely inappropriate. It is also a strategic mistake, a fundamental methodological flaw, and an opportunity missed on a global scale. Members of the international early childhood community – practitioners and scholars – will render IELS findings largely meaningless due to their disconnect with and disrespect for diverse, locally embedded approaches to early childhood education and care.

The general approach suggested by IELS not only underestimates the complexity of local practice, rooted in diverse historical and cultural contexts. It actively contradicts the rights of children, families and communities to meaningful participation in all matters concerning and affecting the upbringing and education of young children. Conspicuous by its absence from the IELS proposal is, for example, 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. In the case of Aotearoa New Zealand, to give just one example, this may lead to existential threats to the culturally sensitive evaluation approach that underpins the world-renowned Te Whāriki curriculum.

If the initiative carries on without a much more proactive and meaningful engagement with the field, resistance will grow and actors at all levels of early childhood systems will individually and collectively reject not only the assessment but also the findings. This, in turn, will contribute to IELS becoming largely meaningless and unable to achieve its stated goals.

Within RECE we understand this to be due to the lack of democratic, professional AND scholarly debate about the purpose of and approach to the initiative. We will continue to work with our international partners (individuals and organisations) to initiate and support this debate at all levels of practice, research and policy-making, and we are looking forward to engaging in a constructive forward looking debate with the proponents of IELS.

Towards Competent Systems

The controversy over how to document, understand, evaluate and support the experiences of the youngest citizens in early childhood education and care institutions and systems points beyond the methodological to more fundamental questions: what is the purpose of early childhood education and care? How do we understand what it means to be a child, and to live and grow up in our societies at this point in time and in the current cultural, economic and political context? How do we understand and shape the relationship between private and the public responsibilities and contributions regarding the upbringing of young children? Each of these questions is contested and subject to democratic debate. How we respond to them, individually and collectively, contributes to shaping our early childhood practices, institutions and policies. The current focus on *early learning* (often with a connotation of preparedness for the following stages of the formal education system) is not the only possible response to the question of purpose of early childhood services. A recent research project funded by the European Commission outlines much deeper connections between early childhood services and societal and political challenges of our time. They include

- promoting democracy, citizenship, children's and civil rights
- working towards equality (of opportunity and outcome) and social cohesion
- addressing diversity (linguistic, ethnic, cultural . . .) and social justice, including children with special educational needs
- reducing poverty and exclusion
- promoting creativity and innovation.

(Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012, p. 478)

While inevitably grounded in local practices and concrete life experiences of children, families and communities, early childhood services are also responding to these much broader and ambitious socio-political agendas. Increasingly, policies at international and national levels are recognising that the realisation of such complex tasks requires shifting our focus from individual elements to the 'bigger picture': the capability of the early childhood system to support competent, meaningful and sustainable interactions between children, practitioners, families and communities. Findings of the international research project *Compe-*

tence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe) suggest that *competence* in early childhood systems unfolds in relationships between individuals, institutions, and governance of the system, based on shared knowledge(s), practices and values (Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011; Urban et al., 2012).

The need for systemic approaches is now widely recognised in national and international early childhood policy documents (Romero et al., 2013; Urban, 2015a; Vandebroek, Urban, & Peeters, 2016; Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014). Competent Systems require systemic evaluation rather than measurement of predetermined and decontextualised outcomes. We strongly believe this is where the OECD and its member states should direct their resources and expertise.

Summary

To sum up our position, we think there are fundamental questions about the proposed International Early Learning Study that call for urgent democratic, scholarly and professional debate. The need for open debate reaches beyond technical ‘consultation’ on methodological or operational aspects of the study. Instead, the motives and interests driving international standardised assessment and its underlying assumptions need to be questioned at all levels. We disagree with an approach that conceptualises and instrumentalises early childhood education and care mainly as preparation for the following stages of formal education, and as tool for achieving long-term economic outcomes – which are in itself questionable or unsubstantiated. The use of research evidence to justify IELS is highly selective, as there appears to be complete disregard of the large and sustained body of critical work, undertaken not least by reconceptualist researchers over the past decades. If this omission was due to those working towards IELS being unaware that substantial counter evidence and counter arguments exist, we would be happy to bring them into the discussion. It would raise fundamental questions, however, about whose political or business interests are being privileged over research evidence, if the omission would be seen to be the result of deliberate disregard of critical scholarship and research.

We are concerned that scarce resources are being directed towards an initiative that will provide little meaningful information for policy makers and practitioners. Considering the growing critique, opposition and resistance to IELS, which will render the entire exercise meaningless, it can only be a distraction from urgently needed systemic evaluations and improvements of early childhood education and care at local level.

We find our argument supported by a broad international consensus (supported by earlier work of the OECD) that more equitable and just experiences for all children and families require competent systems and democratic accountability rather than standardised assessment of narrowly predefined outcomes.

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