

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's International Early Learning Study: Opening for debate and contestation

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood

2016, Vol. 17(3) 343–351

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1463949116661126

cie.sagepub.com



Peter Moss

University College London, UK

Gunilla Dahlberg

University of Stockholm, Sweden

Susan Grieshaber

Monash University, Australia

Susanna Mantovani

University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy

Helen May

University of Otago, New Zealand

Alan Pence

University of Victoria, Canada

Sylvie Rayna

École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, France

Beth Blue Swadener

Arizona State University, USA

Michel Vandebroek

Ghent University, Belgium

Corresponding author:

Peter Moss, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, 27–28 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0AA, UK.

Email: peter.moss@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is initiating the International Early Learning Study, a cross-national assessment of early learning outcomes involving the testing of 5-year-old children in participating countries. The authors use this colloquium to inform members of the early childhood community about this project and to raise concerns about its assumptions, practices and possible effects. The authors also invite readers' comments, to start a process of democratic dialogue and contestation.

Keywords

Cross-national assessment, early childhood education, early learning outcomes, OECD

Anglo-Saxon 'testology' ... is nothing but a ridiculous simplification of knowledge, and a robbing of meaning from individual histories. (Malaguzzi, in Cagliari et al., 2016: 378)

The very act of ordering and measuring the world also changes the world. (Gorur, 2015: 581)

Introducing the International Early Learning Study

Nearly 20 years ago, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) instituted a major international project on early childhood policies and services. 'Starting Strong', as it was called, was a landmark in the comparative study of early childhood education and care, producing two important reports (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2006). While identifying some common features and important policy conclusions, this research into 20 countries using case-study methods was also sensitive to the diversity and complexity of systems and pedagogies.

Two further Starting Strong reports followed, but these were different in focus and tone, with *Starting Strong III* offering 'a quality toolbox for early childhood education and care' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011), while *Starting Strong IV* was about 'monitoring quality' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015b). The shift that they denote in the OECD's approach to early childhood education and care, towards a discourse of outcomes and investment, is further confirmed in a major new project on which the Organisation is now embarking. It is initiating an 'international assessment of children's early learning' – the International Early Learning Study (IELS). Proposed in 2012 by the OECD's early childhood education and care network of government representatives, the IELS has now reached the stage where a call for tenders has been issued to 'design, develop and pilot an international study on children's early learning' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015a: 9), with (as we write) tenders being assessed by the OECD to choose an 'international contractor' to lead the work. The aim is for piloting to be undertaken in three to six countries in late 2017 and the first half of 2018 (28).

What is proposed is an international assessment of early learning outcomes using common instruments to assess a number of 'domains' which 'represent a balance of both cognitive and social and emotional skills that, as a package, will provide coherent and reliable insights into children's early learning' and are 'malleable in the early years' (18). Although the exact domains are yet to be finalised, six have been provisionally identified 'based on an analysis of early skills that are predictive of positive life outcomes': self-regulation, oral language/emergent literacy, mathematics/numeracy, executive function, locus of control and social skills (18–19). Results from assessments of these domains will be contextualised with information on three

areas: early childhood education and care experiences, the home learning environment and the child's individual characteristics. Assessments will be undertaken of children between 4.5 and 5.5 years of age.

The rationale for this global testing regime is stated as:

to help countries improve the performance of their systems, to provide better outcomes for citizens and better value for money. Comparative data can show which systems are performing best, in what domains and for which groups of students. It would also provide insights on how such performance has been achieved. Thus, internationally comparable data would enable countries to compare the relative strengths and areas for development in their own ECEC [early childhood education and care] systems with those in other jurisdictions. (103)

A specific link is made to the OECD's well-established and well-known international assessment of 15-year-olds, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It is argued that an assessment of 5-year-olds can contribute to improving later performance:

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. (103)

What is in the offing is, in effect, a preschool PISA – an addition to ‘the plethora of cross-national tests of pupils’ academic achievement, such as PISA, TIMSS [the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study], PIRLS [the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study], and PIACC [the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies], provided by international agencies’ (Morris, 2016: 1), and indeed to the OECD's other current projects of extending PISA to developing countries (PISA for Development) and developing cross-national assessments of higher education students (the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO)). With the IELTS, the OECD has moved a long way from the in-depth and nuanced approach of the initial Starting Strong study.

Did you know about this?

The OECD has consulted widely about this new project – at least with member-state governments. For example, a group of ‘16 countries has been working with the OECD to scope this study’ (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015a: 9).¹ However, this consultation does not seem to have been extended to the wider early childhood community of practitioners and academics. Some will have picked up word of this initiative, but we suspect that most working in the field are unaware of what is in store.

Yet this new study is neither neutral nor unproblematic. It has important consequences for children, parents, practitioners, policymakers and others. In our view, it raises a number of causes for concern; below we highlight some of ours. For these reasons, we believe that the IELTS needs to be widely publicised and discussed. We hope that this short article will contribute to these goals, and we invite all readers to respond to this colloquium.

Some causes for concern

The IELTS raises many questions, many problems and many causes for concern. We raise five below, but there will be more.

The political reduced to the technical

Education is, first and foremost, a political practice, and policy is the product of politics. In the words of Loris Malaguzzi: '[pedagogy is] always a political discourse whether we know it or not ... [it clearly] also means working with political choices' (Cagliari et al., 2016: 267) – for education confronts us with a range of profound political questions, each with alternative and conflicting answers that require choices to be made. Yet in its documentation for the IELS, the OECD makes no attempt to set out its political questions or to argue for its choices. Instead, it treats early childhood education and the proposed study as if they are purely technical practices, adopting a vision of comparative education as

a technical process modelled on industrial benchmarking, in which the outcomes have been determined, and the aim is simply to engage in the global war for talent by learning enough from [our] competitors to beat them at their own game. (Auld and Morris, 2016: 226)

The approach embodied in the IELS is 'part of a broader drive to position policymaking as a technocratic exercise, to be undertaken by an elite band of experts who are immune to the influence of politics and ideology' (Morris, 2016: 9).

If the OECD were to acknowledge the political nature of education, dropping its technical facade, what political questions might it have asked? We give three here as examples; there are many more:

- What is the image (or social construction) of the child? (an answer to which Malaguzzi insists is a 'necessary premise for any pedagogical theory, and any pedagogical project' (Cagliari et al., 2016: 374))
- What are the purposes of early childhood education?
- What are the fundamental values of early childhood education?

Instead of the OECD engaging with the politics of education and arguing for its own choices, 'the larger questions of purpose and value, which in democratic societies ought to be central to educational debate, are neglected' (Alexander, 2012: 19).

A lack of self-awareness

The OECD, in its documentation on the IELS, adopts a technical approach, implying that what it concludes and recommends is self-evident, objective and uncontested. It is anything but that. The Organisation adopts a particular paradigmatic position which might be described as hyper-positivistic. It values objectivity, universality, predictability and what can be measured. It chooses to work with certain disciplines – notably, particular branches of psychology (child development) and economics (human capital). It accepts a certain economic and political model that presumes a world of more of the same, for which we must 'future-proof' children through the application of human technologies to attain universal goals.

Of course, 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.

We offer three examples of the many glaring omissions that follow from the OECD's failure to recognise alternatives. First, there is a burgeoning movement in the early childhood field that contests the mainstream positivistic narrative to which the OECD is committed, adopting a variety of other paradigmatic, disciplinary and theoretical positions. This movement finds expression in

various forums – for example, the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education group, the American Educational Research Association’s Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood Education Special Interest Group, the Contesting Early Childhood book series, and many academic articles (such as in this journal). Is the OECD aware of such alternative voices?

Second, the OECD’s narrow definition of context – indeed its whole IELS documentation – finds no room for inequality. It assumes that ‘learning outcomes’ can be compared internationally without reference to national differences in this vital variable. Yet, as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett conclude in their major study of inequality and its consequences:

Greater equality, as well as improving the wellbeing of the whole population, is also the key to national standards of achievement and how countries perform in lots of different fields ... If, for instance, a country wants higher average levels of educational achievement among its school children, it must address the underlying inequality which creates a steeper social gradient in educational achievement. (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 29–30)

Third, the environment. It is now widely accepted that we cannot go on as we are; more of the same is not an option. Yet the OECD’s documentation makes no reference to the wider environment and the enormous dangers that humans, as a species, face from a multitude of environmental problems. Nor does it refer to the implications for early childhood education and care, its purposes and pedagogy, of treating this emergent crisis with the seriousness it demands.

Criticism? What criticism?

Reading the IELS documentation, you might be forgiven for thinking that its precursor, PISA, had not been the subject of any criticisms. But it has, and the IELS fails to engage with those criticisms that apply as much to comparative testing of 5-year-olds as 15-year-olds.

Some of these criticisms are of a technical nature (e.g. Morris, 2016: 5–6), with Gorur (2014: 59) pointing to a ‘vast literature that critiques aspects of [PISA’s] methodology’. There are also well-aided arguments about the skewing effect of focusing on those aspects of education that are measurable (Alexander, 2010). But we will focus on more substantive issues – in particular, complexity, context and causality. As Robin Alexander (2012: 5) notes, ‘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’. He warns of the dangers of stripping ‘a country of the complexities of culture, values, social structure, politics and demography ... [though] these are the very features with which we must engage if we are to understand education elsewhere, explain why one country outperforms others’ (Alexander, 2012: 2).

Complexity, context and culture are inescapable in undertaking and interpreting comparative studies; they are essential to understanding. So there can be no easily drawn conclusions about cause and effect, no simple transferrable lessons for policymakers: ‘the complex nature of the subject matter precludes the identification of clear (and generalisable) lines between cause and effect’ (Auld and Morris, 2016: 203). But, in any case, the OECD’s implied model of enlightened policymakers objectively and rationally applying lessons from other countries is naive. What is more apparent in practice is

the 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: 11)

Comparative data, then, is a sort of pick-and-mix, from which to create ‘a façade to legitimize a preferred set of government policy actions’ (Morris, 2016: 26).

Thus ‘reductionism is the name of the game’, leading to ‘questionable claims about cause, effect, what “works” and what does not’ (Alexander, 2010: 812), and the indiscriminate use of results.

Valuing or dismissing diversity

The IELTS and similar testing regimes seek to apply a universal framework to all countries, all pedagogies and all services. This approach rests on the principle that everything can be reduced to a common outcome, standard and measure. What it cannot do is accommodate, let alone welcome, diversity – of paradigm or theory, pedagogy or provision, childhood or culture. The issue raised – and not acknowledged, let alone addressed by the OECD in its documentation – is how an IELTS can be applied to such diversity, to places and people who do not share its (implicit) positions, understandings, assumptions and values.

What about, to take a famous example, the early childhood education in Reggio Emilia, fleetingly mentioned and glibly labelled as a ‘child-centred model’ and adopting a ‘constructivist approach’ (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015a: 102, 41), but which in fact inhabits a pedagogical world totally different to that of the OECD (though inhabited by many tens of thousands of people globally)? A world that consists of the hundred languages of childhood (though, as Malaguzzi wrote, ‘they rob them of ninety-nine, school and culture’ (Malaguzzi, in Cagliari et al., 2016: 259)); a world that sees early childhood education as a means to strengthen democracy, cooperation and social cohesion; and a world that values surprise and wonder over predictability and predetermined outcomes. Reggio Emilia’s strength comes

precisely from this fact that every other week, every other fortnight, every month, something unexpected, something that surprised us or made us marvel, something that disappointed us, something that humiliated us, would burst out in a child or in the children. But this was what gave us our sense of an unfinished world, a world unknown, a world we ought to know better ... To be capable of maintaining this gift of marvelling and wonder is a fundamental quality in a person working with children. (Malaguzzi, in Cagliari et al., 2016: 392)

Or what about the case of New Zealand, which has introduced a highly innovative curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which ‘chooses a socio-cultural approach to curriculum based on a desire to nurture learning dispositions, promote bi-culturalism and to reflect the realities of the young children in the services’ (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004: 17). How would the universal outcomes chosen for the IELTS relate to the Māori-influenced outcomes in New Zealand: well-being, belonging, exploration, communication and collaboration? How, exactly, would the proposed IELTS method relate to *Te Whāriki*’s rejection of observing abilities in a contrived circumstance in favour of being tied to – and revealing themselves in – responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things? In short, how would the IELTS square with the notion, reflected in *Te Whāriki* and in New Zealand’s innovative ‘learning stories’ assessment approach, that

[t]o 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[?] ... [M]any 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)

We are confronted here by ethical questions, in particular, those raised by the ‘ethics of an encounter’ (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). How can we live in a world of diversity without trying to grasp the Other and make the Other into the Same by applying our own perspectives, understandings and categories? How can I think another whom I cannot grasp? Needless to say, just as politics does not appear in the OECD documentation, neither does ethics.

Power is always present

Power, Foucault reminds us, ‘is always present’ (Foucault, 1987: 11). The OECD is an extremely powerful organisation, applying extremely powerful ‘human technologies’, including PISA and the IELTS, for the ‘shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired events’ (Rose, 1999: 52). Furthermore, everything, as Foucault warns, is dangerous, not least cross-national measurement which ‘acts upon the world by changing understandings and behaviours ... [in] a performative or productive process that brings worlds into being’ (Gorur, 2015: 592–593).

The OECD, it seems to us, should be aware of these effects of power and assume a self-critical stance. Yet ‘power’ and its effects do not appear in its documentation – not even in the section headed ‘Risk Management’.

What effects might we expect from the exercise of power through the human technology of the IELTS? Most obviously a growing standardisation and narrowing of early childhood education, as the IELTS tail increasingly wags the early childhood dog. PISA provides a warning. Alexander (2012: 19) has spelt out the direction of travel: ‘curriculum narrows to what is tested, the summative function of assessment is elevated over its formative contribution to children’s understanding and progress’. Paul Morris takes a similar view:

Performance in these tests – along with the consequent onset of PISA ‘envy’ in low-performing nations and, presumably, PISA ‘ecstasy’ in high-performing ones – has emerged as a powerful source of governance that now serves to define the necessity for educational reform, the means to achieve it, and its ends ... [T]he 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)

The drive for league table performance, encouraged by such comparative testing regimes, leads to a more general danger – the ever-increasing governing of children and the adults who live and work with them. Young children in early childhood education and care already face a formidable battery of ‘human technologies’ (Moss, 2014). The OECD’s new testing regime will both add to that battery and increase pressure on early childhood workers to deploy that battery ever more effectively in order to achieve improved performance and promotion up the international league table.

Over to you

In this colloquium we have outlined some of our concerns about the OECD’s International Early Learning Study. There will be others. The creation of a truly educational environment, where learning of real value may take place between countries, requires these and other concerns to be addressed and, probably too, a different type of comparative study – more the initial Starting Strong project with its case studies than the IELTS with its battery of standardised tests. In the interests of a democratic politics of education and of a comparative approach to education that

provokes thought rather than regulates performance, we hope that early childhood communities around the world will raise their voices, and that the OECD will enter into dialogue with them.

Author's note

The authors invite readers to send comments on the IELS and this colloquium to the corresponding author. An anonymised summary of these comments will appear in the next issue of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Professor Paul Morris and Dr Euan Auld for their helpful comments.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

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

References

- Alexander RJ (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Alexander RJ (2010) 'World class schools' – noble aspirations or globalized hokum? *Compare* 40(6): 801–817.
- Alexander RJ (2012) Moral panic, miracle cures and education policy: What can we really learn from international comparisons? *Scottish Education Review* 44(1): 4–21.
- Auld E and Morris P (2016) PISA, policy and persuasion: Translating complex conditions into education 'best practice'. *Comparative Education* 52(2): 202–229.
- Cagliari P, Castegnetti M, Giudici C, et al. (2016) *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A Selection of His Writings and Speeches 1945–1993*. London: Routledge.
- Dahlberg G and Moss P (2005) *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M (1987) The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom. In: Bernauer J and Rasmussen D (eds) *The Final Foucault*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gee JP (2007) Reflections on assessment from a sociocultural-situated perspective. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* 106(1): 362–375.
- Gorur R (2014) Towards a sociology of measurement in education policy. *European Educational Research Journal* 13(1): 58–72.
- Gorur R (2015) Producing calculable worlds: Education at a glance. *Discourse* 36(4): 578–595.
- Morris P (2016) *Education Policy, Cross-National Tests of Pupil Achievement, and the Pursuit of World-Class Schooling*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.
- Moss P (2014) *Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education: A Story of Democracy, Experimentation and Potentiality*. London: Routledge.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001) *Starting Strong I*. Paris: OECD.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2004) *Starting Strong: Curricula and Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education and Care – Five Curriculum Outlines*. Paris: OECD.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) *Starting Strong II*. Paris: OECD.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2011) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015a) Call for tenders: International Early Learning Study. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/callsfortenders/CfT%20100001420%20International%20Early%20Learning%20Study.pdf>

- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015b) *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD.
- Rose N (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilkinson R and Pickett K (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Allen Lane.

Author biographies

Peter Moss is Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Provision at UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

Gunilla Dahlberg is Professor Emerita of Education at Stockholm University, and has served as an expert for several national reforms of the preschool curriculum in Sweden.

Susan Grieshaber is Professor of Early Years at Monash University, Melbourne, and a member of the Ministerial Expert Panel for Early Childhood Development in the state of Victoria.

Susanna Mantovani is Professor of Education at the University of Milano Bicocca, and has been engaged in early childhood research and policy-making in Italy since the 1970s.

Helen May is Professor of Education at the University of Otago, and played a leading role in the development of New Zealand's early childhood curriculum.

Alan Pence is UNESCO Chair for Early Childhood Education, Care and Development and Professor at the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, British Columbia.

Sylvie Reyna is Maître de conférences at the French Institute of Education (École Normale de Lyon) and responsible for the early childhood research programme at the research centre EXPERICE, University Paris 13.

Beth Blue Swadener is Professor of Justice Studies and Social and Cultural Pedagogy at Arizona State University, and a co-founder of Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education.

Michel Vandebroek is Head of the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy at Ghent University, and a member of the Advisory Committee of Kind en Gezin, the Flemish government's agency for child care and family support.