**Briefing and Response to Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), International Early Learning Study (IELS)[[1]](#endnote-1)**

**By**

**ECSDN, TACTYC and SEFDEY[[2]](#endnote-2)**

**About this document and its intended audience:**

This document is a response to the Department for Education’s (DfE) indication that England will participate in the International Early Learning and Child Well-being (IELS) Study, which has been proposed, designed and is led by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This document outlines key issues and concerns arising from the IELS proposal and offers key recommendations for consideration by DfE and related stakeholders, including parents, professionals and academics who work in Early Years, and Further and Higher Education Institutions.

Additional information is provided, which outlines the background to the IELS study, the role of the OECD as a significant contributor to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) research and commentary on the proposed aims, methodology and methods for IELS in participating countries.

**IELS – key concerns:**

This response to the OECD’s proposal for IELS raises the following questions and concerns:

1. It is unclear how the proposed methods involved in the IELS study will achieve the overarching aims, namely: to provide data that will help to identify problems inherent in systems so that these can be rectified and subsequently lead to improved outcomes for children; to provide valid and comparable data on what is possible in participating countries; to adequately reflect the wide-ranging, complex and interconnected aspects of a child’s learning.

2. The proposed methods for collecting data about children - from teachers and parents - raise many concerns about methodological rigour, reliability, comparability and ethics.

3. There is a lack of clarity about the ways in which the aggregated, child-level data will be put to use at a school / setting level; in relation to the types of provision (e.g. maintained / independent / private schools or nurseries); or at a regional or country level and how this might positively or negatively impact on professionals, children or families. Once again, this raises ethical concerns about the ability of participating staff and parents (let alone children) to make *informed* decisions about their involvement.

4. The proposal for the introduction of IELS and associated measurement activities has been subjected to little or no consultation in England among professional / academic groups or among representatives of parent groups, yet the implications are far-reaching.

5. The socio-cultural nature of children’s learning is not adequately reflected in the study’s design and IELS risks imposing uniform constructions of children, their learning, learning contexts and learning encounters that lead to the imposition of systems or models, which ignore and override specific features in situ / local characteristics.

**IELS – key recommendations:**

1. OECD should review its aims and study design and methodology to ensure that the design befits the objectives.

2. OECD should reconsider the methods selected for assessing the quality and impact of ECEC in different settings (currently focused on gathering data about a sample of children, rather than the policies, systems and structures of ECEC) and limit the claims made about what the data from this combination of methods can reliably reveal about children’s learning and improvements to countries’ systems for ECEC.

3. DfE should consult widely and appropriately in advance of any action taken relating to a decision to become involved in the IELS study.

4. OECD and the national bodies responsible for administering / managing the IELS study proposal and plans in each country (e.g. DfE in England) should make explicit the intended inferences from the data and actions at national (policy) level for each participating nation prior to recruiting any participants for the study or appointing an organisation to run the study in each country.

1. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/the-international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study-the-study.htm>) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Early Childhood Studies Degree Network, TACTYC (Association for Professional Development in Early Years) and SEFDEY (Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree in Early Years) are membership organisations with missions for facilitating high quality early learning experiences for young children; and excellent education and training for the adults who work with them in Early Years settings in the maintained, private, voluntary and independent sectors.

   **Briefing:**

   Over the years, the OECD has made a valuable contribution to policy debates about ECEC. As Urban and Swadener (2016: 1) note ‘the Starting Strong I+II studies… (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’. Since at least 2012, OECD have been discussing the possibility of an International Early Learning Study (IELS). Their contention is that ‘many countries have attempted to improve children’s education outcomes through widening the provision, take-up and quality of ECEC, but few have been successful in lifting outcomes at a system level through doing so. In some countries, it appears that an expansion of ECEC services may have lowered the overall quality of ECEC provision. However, countries do not have reliable information on the types of provision that best support particular groups of children, and under what circumstances’ (http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm). The idea is that such a ‘study will answer these questions’.

   The OECD’s view is that ‘improving children’s early learning will provide countries with immense gains in outcomes for individual children, as well as an effective and cost-efficient means to lift the overall performance of their education systems. To achieve such improvements, countries need valid and comparable data on what is possible and where improvements may be made in children’s early learning. Information from this new OECD study on children’s early learning will provide insights on the relative effectiveness, equity and efficiency of ECEC systems and also on the focus needed in early primary schooling. The study will also include a focus on the impacts of children’s home learning environments’ (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>).

   The OECD confirmed in a meeting with Peter Moss (Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood, UCL Institute of Education, Thomas Coram Research Unit) and Mathias Urban (Professor of Early Childhood at the University of Roehampton), in Paris in early February 2017, that a contract for the overall co-ordination of an International Early Learning Study (IELS) has been signed, though they still officially refused to say with whom. They have reportedly expressed their confidence that enough countries are committed to a pilot study for one to go ahead but again refuse to comment on the countries concerned.

   In the UK, DfE have published an expression of interest in tendering over the 2016 – 2017 Christmas and New Year period that says ‘three countries will be part of the pilot, including England and probably Wales’. This would suggest that Scotland and Northern Ireland will not take part. The DfE document also states that the overall co-ordination contract has been awarded to a consortium led by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), together with IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) - an organisation that regularly provides data for TIMMS, PIRLS etc., and cApStAn (responsible for translation of instruments).

   In the UK, the DfE, (2017) have asked for expressions of interest for participation in the study and suggest the age of children that will take part is thought to be between 5 and 5.5 years. The DfE suggests the proposals will enhance the quality and wellbeing of provision and meet the need for valid and comparable data to help facilitate improvements to children’s early learning. Despite the issuing of the expression of interest in tendering, which has now closed and can no longer be accessed on the DfE site, a spokesperson for the Department told the Daily Telegraph / Nursery World that no decision has yet been made about whether the UK will be participating in the pilot programme.

   **Domains to be assessed**

   Whilst the OECD note ‘Early skill development is inter-related and mutually reinforcing, so it is necessary to look at a basket of capabilities rather than a narrow focus on a few areas’ (http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm), they go on to note that ‘the domains selected should be those that are malleable in the early years, including in ECEC environments’ (<http://www.oecd.org/callsfortenders/CfT%20100001420%20International%20Early%20Learning%20Study.pdf>) and that six possible domains have been identified:

   * **Self-regulation** (encompassing self-control, grit, self-management and conscientiousness).
   * **Oral language/emergent literacy** (speaking, listening and understanding, including knowledge of the sounds produced while speaking (phonemes); the rules a given language requires to construct sentences (syntax); and that concepts have meaning (semantics) / children’s knowledge of print, letters and sounds).

   There is some recognition that ‘it will be important to reflect country differences in the ages at which children are introduced to reading and writing’.

   * **Mathematics/numeracy** (ability to reason and apply simple numerical concepts, comprising the ability to identify and understand numbers as well as computational skills / in early numeracy, children are detecting patterns and beginning to understand that things can be measured).
   * **Executive function** (regulating attention, including controlling reactions to new stimuli; working memory and planning, which are also associated with later academic development)
   * **Self-awareness / locus of control** (children’s own beliefs about whether they can complete tasks, encompassing aspects such as self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy and locus of control / whether a person believes their own performance is based on external factors or internal factors).

   This attribution style relates to having either a “fixed mindset” (believing that capabilities are inborn and unchangeable) or a “growth mindset” (believing that capabilities, including intelligence can be developed and increased), leading to different behaviours and achievement. Locus of control has not commonly been included in assessments of early learning, but analysis undertaken by the UCL Institute of Education has highlighted it as highly predictive of later life outcomes and so the contract will be ‘invited to advise on the usefulness and feasibility of including locus of control in the study, alongside other recommended domains’.

   • **Social skills** (pro-social behaviour, agreeableness, sociability, empathy and trust)

   In addition the study is expected to collect information on:

   **The home learning environment** (‘learning and development-related activities parents undertake with their children and the frequency of these activities: reading books, singing, telling stories, playing games, doing puzzles and doing art and crafts; the extent to which parents are actively engaged in their child’s ECEC experiences;…. the extent to which parents and ECEC staff share information and strategies to support the child’s learning and development’).

   **Individual characteristics (**Gender, ethnicity, linguistic background, migration history and status, socio-economic and family background, disabilities and special learning needs).

   <http://www.oecd.org/callsfortenders/CfT%20100001420%20International%20Early%20Learning%20Study.pdf>

   Whilst the OECD refers to these possible domains for assessment in its tender document, the DfE, in its call for Expressions of Interest, refers to four domains:

   * executive function
   * emergent literacy, language and verbal skills;
   * numeracy and mathematics;
   * empathy and trust

   According to the DfE, the assessment “is likely to involve 15-20 minutes of direct testing for each of the four domains in the study”; in addition to these tests, “the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire will be used to assess social skills, and is completed by both the child’s parent/s and by the child’s teacher or ECEC practitioner”.

   **The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ**) is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire for 4 -16 year olds. It exists in several versions to meet the needs of researchers, clinicians and educationalists. Each version includes between one and three of the following components:

   #### *A) 25 items on psychological attributes.*

   All versions of the SDQ ask about 25 attributes, some positive and others negative.  These 25 items are divided between 5 scales:

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   | 1) emotional symptoms (5 items) |  | 1) to 4) added together to generate a total difficulties score (based on 20 items) |
   | 2) conduct problems (5 items) |  |
   | 3) hyperactivity/inattention (5 items) |  |
   | 4) peer relationship problems (5 items) |  |
   | 5) prosocial behaviour (5 items) |  |  |  |

   The same 25 items are included in questionnaires for completion by the parents or teachers of 4-16 year olds.

   A slightly modified informant-rated version for the parents or nursery teachers of 3 (and 4) year olds. 22 items are identical, the item on reflectiveness is softened, and 2 items on antisocial behaviour are replaced by items on oppositionality.

   Questionnaires for self-completion by adolescents ask about the same 25 traits, though the wording is slightly different. This self-report version is suitable for young people aged around 11-16, depending on their level of understanding and literacy.

   #### *B) An impact supplement*

   Several two-sided versions of the SDQ are available with the 25 items on strengths and difficulties on the front of the page and an impact supplement on the back. These extended versions of the SDQ ask whether the respondent thinks the young person has a problem, and if so, enquire further about chronicity, distress, social impairment, and burden to others.  This provides useful additional information for clinicians and researchers with an interest in psychiatric caseness and the determinants of service use.

   #### *C) Follow-up questions*

   The follow-up versions of the SDQ include not only the 25 basic items and the impact question, but also two additional follow-up questions for use after an intervention. Has the intervention reduced problems? Has the intervention helped in other ways, e.g. making the problems more bearable? To increase the chance of detecting change, the follow-up versions of the SDQ ask about 'the last month', as opposed to 'the last six months or this school year', which is the reference period for the standard versions. Follow-up versions also omit the question about the chronicity of problems.

   [**http://www.sdqinfo.org/a0.html**](http://www.sdqinfo.org/a0.html)

   **Response**

   **The ECSDN, TACTYC and SEFDEY** recognise the important role of the OECD in informing and promoting quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practice. Our commitment is to providing a critical perspective on, and a forum for the advancement of, appropriate early years policies, initiatives and legislation, favouring equalities and opposing discrimination. Like Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education (RECE), we seek to better understand how ECEC can create more just and equitable outcomes for children, families, and the wider community. We seek to enhance quality and impact through the application and championing of research. Like RECE, we see ECEC practices as messy, complex, unique and culturally and contextually located.

   The OECD proposals are of interest to the **ECSDN, TACTYC and SEFDEY**, but they raise questions in terms of:

   * 1. how it is possible to develop appropriate measures to interrogate such wide ranging and complex interconnected aspects of children’s learning.
     2. the extent to which this can be evaluated by measuring content, methods and effectiveness requires considerable debate.
     3. professional concerns about the use to which any resulting instruments and or measures will be put.
     4. lack of consultation. Moss et al. (2016) highlight that plans for the IELS have been taking shape since at least 2012 and OECD member state governments have been consulted during this period but the wider early childhood community of practitioners, parents and academics has not been consulted, beyond the immediate group of country representatives at the OECD Starting Strong network, which is deeply worrying since IELS is intended to have direct impact on the practices of potentially all early childhood services in and beyond the participating countries. The DfE in England has similarly made little attempt to inform and consult, either on the wider OECD plans or on England’s participation in IELS.

   The proposals are of concern to the **ECSDN, TACTYC and SEFDEY** because any determination of quality needs to carefully consider wider perspectives than those reflected by a single measurement or instrument. An “objective” approach such as that suggested by OECD, by contrast, holds that quality can be commonly characterised and defined. Despite claiming some common features of quality in its 2012 Starting Strong ‘Quality Toolbox’, OECD has previously demonstrated the variety that exists in different local contexts (Starting Strong I and II). A great deal of research now exists that illustrates this diversity and the dangers of attempting to impose a single framework that ignores or overrides local traditions. These dangers are evident, for example, in the failure of the UNICEF Early Learning and Development Standards programme

   **ECSDN, TACTYC and SEFDEY** are concerned, like RECE, that the pilot and field trials associated with this study will focus on instruments to compare and contrast outcomes. This attempt at standardisation does not take into account the complexity and contextuality of children’s learning nor the potential harm which may result when a system which has been developed in a particular socio-economic, political and cultural context is implemented in another context. In addition, any attempt to standardise assessment for young children will always be open to different interpretations, depending on the context and the person who is carrying out the assessment. There needs to be a clear common understanding of pedagogical processes in early childhood education*.* This involves knowledge of the culturally-sensitive characteristics of a high-quality environment for children’s learning and development. It has to take account of the principles and learning goals set out in any prescribed curriculum and the perceived existing quality in ECEC settings, which are often shaped by ECEC practitioners at local level who develop a response to different economic, educational and cultural contexts. Like RECE, we believe this is where the OECD and its member states should be directing their attention but struggle to see how IELS is going to provide a meaningful basis for achieving this, as it seems to disregard the diverse and complex histories, practices, understandings and values of ECEC.

   Like RECE (<http://receinternational.org/pdf/RECE_OECD_response_for_ICCPS.pdf>), **ECSDN, TACTYC and SEFDEY** are committed to the study and evaluation of culturally and contextually sensitive educational outcomes for children, their families and society but we are concerned that IELS appears to favour an approach that largely focuses on the decontextualised comparison and measurement of narrowly defined pre-determined outcomes. As Brogaard Clausen et al note (2015: 2123) ‘When the language of education is limited to a list of pre-standardised indicators, conceptions of learning and ability are narrowed and the space for informal learning and provisional understandings shrinks, concealing the fact that learning is transient, dependent upon context and time’.

   We are particularly concerned about the extent to which the proposed IELS will incorporate recognition of potential causal relationships between early childhood events and later outcomes. Longitudinal Studies from the UK, USA and New Zealand suggest that focusing on literacy and numeracy in a formalised learning environment  might be associated with higher test scores at age five but that more mixed pedagogies lead to improved outcomes at age 11. Similarly, it is possible that systems that start formal schooling later (such as Finland) may have better outcomes at age 16. Before embarking on data collection, careful consideration needs to be given to comparing data across a range of different cultural contexts and age sampling points. Results of the initial data sets should not be reported or be reported with extreme caution until the influences from age five to age 16 can be seen more clearly. There is a significant danger that political and media pressure to deliver ‘good scores’ at age five on the basis of preliminary results could distort later outcomes. The differing theoretical constructs which underpin notions of developmental sequences and the multitude of factors that impact on children’s development need to be clearly acknowledged. Following RECE, ECSDN, TACTYC and SEFDEY are concerned that such an approach will not provide meaningful information for decision makers and early childhood leaders but, instead, will draw early childhood education firmly into a global framework of standardised assessment, and practices driven by this, across all tiers of the education system, from early childhood to higher education.

   As RECE highlight, what seems to have been overlooked is that the purposes of early childhood education and care are contested and should be subject to democratic debate. The current focus on early learning (often with a connotation of preparedness for the following stages of the formal education system and for employment) is not the only possible response to the question of what early childhood services are for.

   **Acknowledgements**

   Briefing on the OECD’s International Early Learning Study by Peter Moss

   Response to IELS by Michael Reed on behalf of the Centre for Children and Families (CCF) at the University of Worcester

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