**OECD’s International Early Learning Study: Briefing No. 2, August 2017**

Peter Moss[[1]](#footnote-1)

This second briefing note on OECD’s proposed ‘International Early learning and Child Well-being Study’ (referred to as IELS) updates an earlier briefing in January, which can be found at <https://www.newvisionsforeducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/OECD-study-briefing-2017.pdf>. OECD was then intending to conduct a pilot study, involving 3 to 6 countries, of an international assessment of 4.5 to 5.5-year-olds across a number of ‘domains’ that “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 that are “malleable in the early years”[[2]](#footnote-2). OECD envisaged IELS connecting with its wide-ranging and influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), its three-yearly assessment of 15-year-olds begun in 2000 and now covering 72 ‘countries and economies’. Assessing 5-year-olds, OECD argued, can contribute to improving later performance, in time providing “information on the trajectory between early learning outcomes and those at age 15, as measured by PISA…[giving countries] an earlier and more specific indication of how to lift the skills and other capabilities of its young people”.

After a tendering process, the OECD had appointed an ‘International Contractor’ to design, develop and pilot the IELS, a consortium including the Australian Council for Educational Research and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. In January 2017, the English Department for Education (EDfE) made known England’s participation in the pilot stage of the IELS, putting out a call for expressions of interest (CEI) to provide a ‘National Centre’ to implement and administer the pilot stage of the IELS in England. Piloting, the CEI said, would involve 3000 children aged 5-5.5 years, composed of 15 children per school in at least 200 schools (England, with its early school entry, is unusual internationally for this age group already being in primary school). The EDfE hoped at this point to sign a contract for the National Centre in April 2017; the study would run to May 2020.

**Subsequent developments**

*From pilot to main study*

OECD has set up an extensive website about the project (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>), replacing an earlier, one page website containing minimal information. The current website has pages on the background to the study, the study itself, responses to FAQs, and a 24-page brochure called *Early Learning Matters*. It shows a significant change to the IELS; whereas earlier documents (and the EDfE’s CEI) referred to a pilot study, there is now no reference to this. Instead, following a short period of design and development, with an accompanying ‘field trial’, the IELS will go straight in to what the website refers to as a ‘main study’, to be undertaken in 2018 (‘Northern hemisphere’) and 2019 (‘Southern hemisphere’), followed by ‘quality control and data analysis’ and a ‘report’ in 2019-2020. This suggests that OECD now sees the initial round of assessments (in 2018-19) as the start of an actual new study, rather than as an exploratory study prior to deciding whether or not to proceed further.

*Assessment: what and how*

The new website provides more details of how the IELS will be conducted. Four early learning ‘domains’ (emerging literacy/language skills, emerging numeracy/mathematics, self-regulation, and empathy and trust) will be assessed using tablets, each domain taking “approximately 15 minutes” and the whole exercise spread over two days. In addition, indirect assessment of children’s skills, as well as ‘contextual information’, will be obtained from parents and staff through written and online questionnaires; while “[s]tudy administrators will provide additional information from their observation of the child during the direct assessment…[to] be used for both survey quality control and assessment purposes”.

Children’s perspectives will also be sought by asking

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.

There is, however, no indication that children’s consent to participate will be sought.

*England and the USA: a new special relationship?*

While the OECD website still refers to the IELS operating across 3 to 6 countries, so far only two countries are known to have agreed to participate: England and the United States.

Having stated in their CEI of January 2017 that England would participate in the IELS, the EDfE backtracked, saying the matter was still under consideration, before finally confirming England’s participation in early July 2017. It announced then that the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) would be the National Centre responsible for administering the IELS in England; Professors Iram Siraj (UCL Institute of Education) and Kathy Sylva (University of Oxford) will be working with NFER on this project.

In June 2017, the US Department of Education announced (<https://govtribe.com/project/international-early-learning-study-pilot-iels-presolicitation>) that a federal contract for work on the IELS had been awarded, on behalf of the Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, to Westat Inc., described as an “employee-owned statistical survey research corporation”.

Though the EDfE’s CEI in January referred to Wales expressing “an interest in taking part in the study…[and that a decision] will be taken by early February”, nothing further has been reported; the CEI also stated that “Scotland and Northern Ireland will not be taking part”. At the time of the first briefing, other European countries had said they would not participate, including Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden. Since then, other countries have said they will not participate, including Japan and New Zealand. Neither the EDfE nor OECD have said whether any other countries are expected to participate.

*What next in England?*

A National Advisory Committee has been set up, with its first meeting in July. It is to “to provide independent advice, guidance and constructive feedback to DfE and NFER on the implementation of the study” and “draws members from a range of independent organisations and individuals, whether supportive or critical of the study”. Membership is still being finalised.

**Continuing causes for concern**

*Lack of consultation and ignoring criticism*

The January briefing concluded that

the OECD has shown little interest in opening up their proposals to public scrutiny and debate. Some may have got wind of this initiative, but most working in the field have been unaware of what is in store and many still are. The DfE in England has similarly made no attempt to inform and consult, either on the wider OECD plans or on England’s participation in IELS. The whole exercise has been shrouded in secrecy.

The situation is little changed. The EDfE has now set up an Advisory Committee, but only after the decision to participate was taken, a decision about which there was no consultation or public debate. Nor has there been any attempt, by the OECD or EDfE, to acknowledge or respond to the concerns and criticisms voiced in England and other countries about the IELS (a list of some critical articles and documents is given in an Annex at the end of this briefing).

*Lack of participating countries.*

The secrecy that has surrounded the whole project since it was first mooted in 2012 continues, with OECD providing no public list of which countries have decided to participate and, equally important, which have decided not to and why. At present, only two countries are known to be taking part, England and the US; if others have agreed to participate or are thinking of doing so, it is strange that they were not mentioned by EDfE when it formally announced England’s participation in July. The fact Wales was not mentioned then suggests that it has decided against participation.

If there are, as it seems, only two participating countries, this undermines the study. Not only does it indicate a widespread lack of interest or support, but an international study consisting of only two countries, both Anglophone nations with very similar service systems, is clearly unsatisfactory and of limited value.

*Undermining diversity*

With its universal and standardised approach, the IELS cannot accommodate or welcome the diversity of context, culture and purpose found in early childhood education. This brings the worrying prospect of “a growing standardisation and narrowing of early childhood education, as the IELS tail increasingly wags the early childhood dog”. The experience of PISA provides a warning:

[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[[3]](#footnote-3).

*A wasted opportunity*

Criticisms of IELS are not driven by opposition to comparative studies of early childhood education. Most are voiced by advocates of such work, but who believe that the IELS is a wasted opportunity and want instead comparative studies of early childhood education that “adopt an approach that is respectful of diversity, welcoming of complexity, inclusive of the field’s multiple perspectives and provoking of thought”. It is not publicly known how much money has been allotted to IELS, in England or the US or overall; but consultation and open debate at any earlier stage might have led to better use and wider participation.

**Annex. Some critical responses to OECD’s International Early learning and Child Well-being Study**

Carr, M., Mitchell, L. and Rameka, L. (2016) ‘Some thoughts about the value of an OECD international assessment framework for early childhood services in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17(4): 450–454

Mackey, G., Hill, D. and De Vocht, L. (2016) ‘Response to the colloquium ‘The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s International Early Learning Study: Opening for debate and contestation’, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17(4): 447-449.

Moss, P., Dahlberg, G., Grieshaber, S., Mantovani, S., May, H., Pence, A., Rayna, S., Swadener, B.B. and Vandenbroeck, M. (2016) ‘The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s International Early Learning Study: Opening for debate and contestation’, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17(3): 343-351.

Moss, P. and Urban, M. (2017) ‘The OECD’s International Early Learning Study: what happened next’, Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 18 (2): 250-258.

PLÉ (Pedagogy, Learning and Education Association Ireland) (2017) *PLÉ response to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) International Early Learning Study.* Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317155511\_PLE\_response\_to\_the\_Organisation\_for\_Economic\_Cooperation\_and\_Development\_OECD\_International\_Early\_Learning\_Study

Urban, M. and Swadener, B.B. (2016) ‘Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation’, *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies* 5(1). Available at: http://journals.sfu.ca/iccps/index.php/childhoods/article/view/71/pdf

1. Peter Moss is an Emeritus Professor at UCL Institute of Education, University College London. He can be contacted at peter.moss@ucl.ac.uk. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The quotations about IELS in this paragraph come from the OECD’s tender document for “an international contractor to design, develop and pilot an international study on children’s early learning” (<http://www.oecd.org/callsfortenders/CfT%20100001420%20International%20Early%20Learning%20Study.pdf>). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Morris P (2016) *Education Policy, Cross-National Tests of Pupil Achievement, and the Pursuit of World-Class Schooling*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press [↑](#footnote-ref-3)