

Briefing on the OECD's International Early Learning Study

Peter Moss¹

The proposed study

Since its first outing in 2000, the Programme for International Student Assessment, widely known as PISA, has become highly influential in the education world with its three-yearly assessment of 15-year-olds in a growing number of countries around the world. Now the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD) is moving on to new ground, with plans well advanced for an international assessment of early learning outcomes among young children. This **International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study** (IELS) will use common measures to assess young children across participating countries on 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. Though 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. Results from assessing these domains will be contextualised with information on ECEC [early childhood education and care] experiences, home learning environment and children's individual characteristics. Assessments will be undertaken of children between 4.5 and 5.5 years.

IELS is intended "to help countries improve the performance of their systems, to provide better outcomes for citizens and better value for money...[by showing] which systems are performing best, in what domains and for which groups of students... [and providing] insights on how such performance has been achieved". OECD further argues that assessing 5-year-olds 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".

International testing of young children was first mooted in 2012 by the OECD's ECEC network of government representatives, since when a group of 16 countries has been working with the OECD "to scope this study". These countries as listed by OECD include, somewhat confusingly, 'United Kingdom' and 'Wales (United Kingdom)' – this seems to mean England and Wales, but not Scotland or Northern Ireland.

From proposal to piloting

Now the pace is hotting up. In September 2016, the OECD appointed an 'International Contractor' to design, develop and pilot the study, a consortium

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.

² The quotations about IELS in this and the next 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>).

including the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). ACER is an independent educational research organisation; and the IEA is an international cooperative of national research institutions and governmental research agencies, already responsible for a number of international assessments in areas such as maths, science and reading, including TIMSS and PIRLS.

OECD's webpage for the IELS (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>) offers a timeline for the pilot study: developing and field testing assessment instruments during 2017/2018; running the pilot study in late 2018/early 2019; results available by early 2020. There is no information on when, following the conclusion of the pilot study, the first full-scale cross-national assessment will take place nor how often it is envisaged that this cross-national assessment will occur.

England joins the IELS pilot

In its document inviting tenders for the role of 'International Contractor', OECD envisages 3 to 6 countries participating in the pilot stage of the IELS. At the time of writing I am aware of only one country that has publicly committed to participate – England (though Wales has, apparently, also expressed an interest in taking part). The English Department for Education has stated that three countries have agreed to participate in the pilot study, but does not state who the other two countries are. Scotland and Northern Ireland will not be taking part, and some other European countries have similarly said they will not participate (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden).

The English Department for Education (DfE) made known England's participation in the pilot stage of the IELS in January 2017 when it put out a call for expressions of interest to provide a 'National Centre' to implement and administer this stage of the IELS in England (and possibly also in Wales where a decision is expected in February) (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/582355/Call_for_expressions_of_interest_-_IELS_FINAL.pdf). Piloting, we are told, will involve 3000 children aged 5-5.5 years, composed of 15 children per school in at least 200 schools (in most countries, the target age group are in early childhood services; England, therefore, with its early school entry is unusual in the IELS applying to children in primary school). According to DfE, the assessment "is likely to involve 15-20 minutes of direct testing for each of the four domains in the study"³; 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 DfE hopes to sign a contract for this National Centre in April 2017 and the study will run through to May 2020.

³ The OECD refers to six possible domains for assessment in its tender document (see first paragraph of this briefing). In its call for Expressions of Interest, the DfE refers to four domains: executive function, i.e. early self-regulation and attention; emergent literacy, language and verbal skills; numeracy and mathematics; and empathy and trust.

Secrecy and concerns

The plans for the IELS have been gestating over several years, and OECD member state governments have been consulted during this period. But the wider early childhood community of practitioners and academics has not been; 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.

This in itself is deeply concerning. But so too, for many people, is the spread of international testing to 5-year-olds. It raises important issues and questions. Some of these have been put forward in four recent publications:

- from a group of nine senior academics from nine countries (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1463949116661126>);
- from the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education (RECE) group (<http://receinternational.org/RECE-comment-on-OECD-ICCPS.html>);
- from New Zealand OMEP and academics (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1463949116680699>) (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1463949116680705>).

Neither OECD nor the DfE have responded to the concerns being raised by these and other critical voices, ignoring them as they forge ahead with this new venture. The OECD is an extremely powerful organisation, applying extremely powerful 'human technologies', including PISA and IELS. Yet the possible adverse effects of this power, such as the narrowing and standardisation of early childhood or primary education, do not figure in OECD's documentation for IELS, not even in the section headed 'risk management'. The article from nine senior academics, referred to above, ends with a clear statement of intent: "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". That remains my hope.

21st January 2017