

Special Issue Title:

Opening for Debate and Contestation: OECD's International Early Learning Study and the Testing of Children's Learning Outcomes

Background

Large-scale standardized assessment of learning outcomes in early childhood education (ECE) has been strongly criticised because of its negative impact on children's learning experiences and wellbeing (Dahlberg et al., 2016; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2014; Penn, 2014). Standardized assessment for educational purposes ignores the evidence against testing young children's learning (Moss et al., 2016; Urban & Swadener, 2016) and subsequently decontextualizes the complexity of their diverse learning experiences. Moreover, some have argued that standardized testing would pave the road for the marketization and privatization of early childhood education and thus diminishing its public educational purpose (Penn, 2007).

Despite these critiques, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has now started work on the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS), which was first proposed in 2012 by the OECD's ECEC network of government representatives. The IELS is a cross-national standardised assessment of early learning outcomes involving the testing of children between the ages of 5 to 5.5 years old in officially registered early childhood centres and/or schools in participating countries (OECD, n.d.); tablets will be used to assess early learning 'domains' (emerging literacy, emerging numeracy, self-regulation, and empathy and trust), each domain taking approximately 15 minutes. The stated purpose of the IELS is to improve early childhood services by providing 'researchers and educators in the field of early education with valid and comparable information on children's early learning'. It is also argued that IELS will help countries to improve later educational performance by giving 'an earlier and more specific indication of how to lift the skills and other capabilities of its young people'; IELS, therefore, is specifically envisaged as connecting with PISA.

In 2016, as news about the proposed IELS began to spread, a number of responses from the international early childhood education community appeared in academic journals, websites, colloquiums, and non-governmental organizations, exposing concern about the design and implementation of this study (Dahlberg et al., 2016; Moss, 2017; Urban & Swadener, 2016). For instance, on behalf of the

international Reconceptualizing Early Childhood network, Mathias Urban and Beth Swadener (2016) wrote a paper entitled: *Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation: A comment on the OECD initiative to launch an international Early Learning Study (IELS)*. In this paper, the authors put forward "a call for supporting competent systems, democratic accountability, and systemic evaluation" (Urban & Swadener, 2016, p. 1). To date, this statement has been signed by more than one hundred and fifty scholars, senior academic researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. At the core of their concerns is the damaging impact that a large-scale standardized testing, like the IELS, may have on children's learning experiences and wellbeing. In a context of neoliberal approaches to education, the standardized assessment of young children's learning outcomes may reinforce competition between countries, centres, and children, for example through the future development of league tables. Increasing competition in early childhood education may facilitate the appropriate conditions for corporate profits through the marketization and privatization of early childhood education and care provision (Ball, 1998).

The implementation of the IELS can be seen as just the latest piece in a whole framework of standardized testing running from early years to adulthood, in which international agencies like the OECD play a leading role. As such, the IELS is part of a widespread model that privileges standardized testing at the expense of more comprehensive and contextualized ways of enhancing and evaluating education. Narratives on early childhood education as an equalizer of opportunities especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds have been used to justify the adoption of the private sector's principles, values and strategies in public education or in services with a public impact as is the case in early childhood education and care provision (Penn, 2011). Under the premise of ensuring a better future for all children, initiatives like the IELS are currently underway without an appropriate consultation to early childhood education communities including researchers, advocates, educators, and parents.

The Special Issue:

In the context of the IELS, this Special Issue aims to engage with critical perspectives on standardized testing of young children and alternative forms of contextualized and systemic evaluation of early learning. This can be at a local, regional, national or international level, but the editors of this special issue

particularly encourage contributions that engage with the growing and highly influential role of OECD (and other international organisations) in education, particularly through reinforcing a framework of standardised testing in early childhood education systems. They seek to continue the critical analysis of the impact of initiatives like the IELS on early childhood education at international and local levels, already started by scholars and educators.

The editors invite submissions that respond to, but are not limited to, these questions: What is the rationality for and what are the consequences of standardised assessments of young children? How does standardized testing of young children impact children's learning experiences and wellbeing? How does standardised testing connect with other technologies of management and control? What might be the impact that discourses of educational performance and learning outcomes bring into discussions about the purpose of early childhood education? What challenges might countries face in the design and implementation of early childhood policies vis-à-vis large-scale testing of children's skills? What is the future of early childhood education under the principles dictated by discourses of ranking, performance, and outcomes? What influence do international organisations like the OECD have on early childhood education and how does this influence work? What alternatives to cross-national testing of early learning outcomes exist to enhance the provision of policy alternatives in early childhood? What is at stake in the design and implementation of large-scale testing on young children, nationally and internationally? What creative responses can international and local early childhood education communities deliver to contest the implementation of standardized testing of young children?

Scope

In the context of the OECD's IELS, topics of interest include, but are not limited to:

- Critiques of neoliberal approaches to ECE
- Historical inquiry in standardized testing in ECE
- Standardized testing, privatization and marketization in ECE
- Intersections between ethics in ECE and standardized testing
- Children's learning experiences and standardized testing

Timeline

- (a) Call for Proposal is distributed by September 2017.
- (b) Potential authors submit an abstract (up to 750 words) by November 10th, 2017 to claudia.diaz@alumni.ubc.ca or paulinas@alumni.ubc.ca. The abstract should include an overview of the proposed paper and references.
- (b) Outcome of the reviews of the abstracts (to be reviewed by the editors) will be announced by December 15th, 2017.
- (c) Authors of successful abstracts will be invited to submit a full manuscript at <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/pfie> by April 6th 2018.
- (d) Special issue editors send revisions to authors by July 6th, 2018.
- (e) Authors submit final manuscripts by September 7th, 2018.

Submission Guidelines

For the full manuscript word limits, reference styles, and submission guidelines, please refer to the Policy Futures in Education's homepage:

<https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/oc/e/journal/policy-futures-education>.

The Guest Editors

Claudia Díaz-Díaz is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Studies in the University of British Columbia. Her doctoral research investigates how young children (aged 3 to 5) learn about social responsibility and diversity through early childhood education environments and how this learning informs their subjectivities. She is interested in policy in early childhood education, materialist theories and methodologies, and early childhood studies.

Paulina Semeneć is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Studies at The University of British Columbia (UBC), in Vancouver BC, Canada. Her doctoral dissertation explores the affective and spatial dimensions of social and emotional learning curricula in an elementary school setting. She is interested in post-qualitative and visual research methodologies, as well as critical childhood studies.

Peter Moss is an emeritus professor of Early Childhood Provision at UCL Institute of Education, University College London. He has published widely on neoliberal and other dominant discourses in early childhood education.

Please direct any inquiry to guest editors at

claudia.diaz@alumni.ubc.ca or paulinas@alumni.ubc.ca

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