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Technical Report · May 2017

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.27964.85122

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Introduction

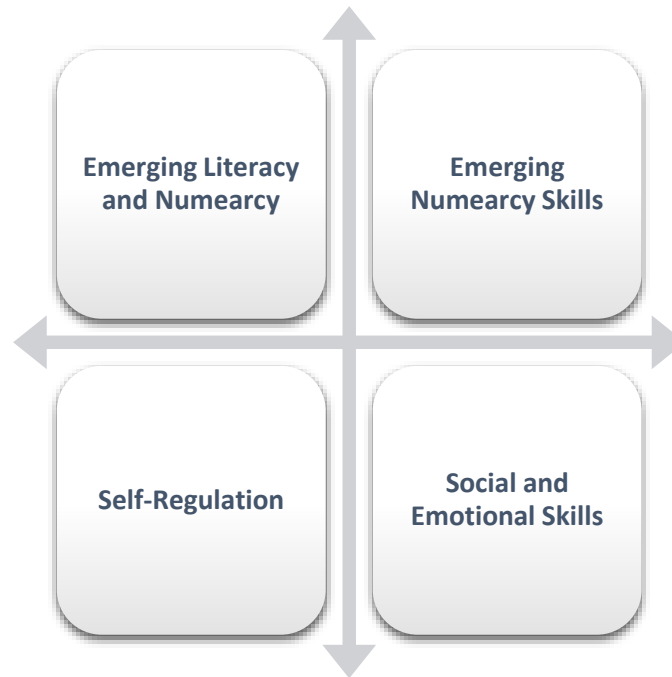
In 1998, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Education Committee launched a *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care*, which resulted in two reports: *Starting Strong I* (2001) and *Starting Strong II* (2006). Both reports which provided a comparative analysis of ECEC across OECD countries, were concerned with improving the quality of, and access to provision, while being mindful of the diversity and complexity of systems, curricula and pedagogical approaches in different countries. While these reports highlighted the need for a strong and equal partnership with the education system, they were critical of systems that focused upon cognitive development in the early years, and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and dispositions, suggesting that such approaches ‘are poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children’ (OECD, 2006, p.13). Interestingly, as noted by Moss, Dahlberg, Grieshaber, Mantovani et al, (2016) and Urban & Swadener, (2016) the focus and tone of subsequent *Starting Strong* reports represented a significant shift in the OECD’s approach to ECEC, towards ‘a discourse of outcomes and investments’ (p. 344). Consequently, *Starting Strong III* (OECD, 2011) offered a ‘quality toolbox for ECEC’, with *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in ECEC* (OECD, 2015), suggesting that governments should regularly monitor and evaluate ECEC, staff performance, and children’s development in order to boost standards. The concept of accountability, clearly linked to ‘return on investment’ for expenditure on ECEC (OECD tender for IELS, 2016, p. 97) had moved centre stage.

International Early Learning Study

It is indeed disappointing to see that the OECD is now attempting to further consolidate this shift in position by initiating the International Early Learning Study (IELS), a cross-national assessment of early learning outcomes involving the testing of children between 4.5 to 5.5

years in 3-6 participating countries initially (OECD, IELTS Tender, 2016, p.18). Figure 1 provides an overview of the domains to be assessed.

Figure 1: Domains to be assessed by the OECD International Early Learning Study



The domains to be assessed ‘represent a balance of both cognitive and social and emotional skills’ (OECD, 2016, p. 18), and are seemingly benign. However, the finer detail associated with these domains, as outlined in the call for tenders, is concerning. The domains are outlined as follows:

- **Self-Regulation** encompassing self-control, grit, self-management and conscientiousness.
- **Oral language** including the:
 - **Sounds** produced while speaking (phonemes)
 - **Rules** a given language requires to construct sentences (syntax), and
 - **Understanding that concepts have meaning** (semantics)

- **Emergent literacy** associated with children's knowledge of print, letters and sounds, which will help them to learn to decode and read for meaning, building upon oral language skills
- **Numeracy** including the ability to reason and apply simple numerical concepts. It comprises the ability to identify and understand numbers as well as computational skills, ie the ability to count and to perform simple arithmetical operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and compare numerical magnitudes
- **Executive function** related to childrens' ability to regulate attention, including controlling reactions to new stimuli, working memory and planning, which are also associated with later academic development
- **Self-Awareness/Locus of control** refers to children's own beliefs about whether they possess the ability to complete tasks, and encompasses aspects such as self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy and locus of control
- **Social skills** encompassing pro-social behaviour, and sociability. Within this domain children will be assessed on their ability to take the perspective of another, to demonstrate prosocial behaviour (ie showing kindness, sharing, co-operation, and respect for others), agreeableness and empathy (OECD, IELTS Tender, 2016, p.18-20).

It is inconceivable that the OECD would consider that testing 4.5 – 5.5 year old children as outlined, is suited to their psychology and natural learning strategies. On the contrary, PLÉ considers that the IELTS' focus upon comparative education, represents a narrow interpretation of education, as well as a considerable shift away from the concept of holistic child development which recognises that children are not divided up into separate domains, learning styles, intelligences, attitudes, dispositions or creativities. Indeed, the IELTS is at odds with the national frameworks for quality and curriculum both of which were developed following extensive consultation with the ECEC sector in Ireland. Named *Síolta*, developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2006) and *Aistear*, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) respectively, both frameworks emphasise the integrated nature of children's learning and development from birth to six years of age.

The National Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education acknowledge children's 'role in constructing and reconstructing personal meaning within their cultural contexts' (2016). However, as Urban & Swadener (2016) argue,

the general approach suggested by IELS not only underestimates the complexity of local practice, rooted in diverse historical and cultural contexts. It actively contradicts the rights of children, families and communities to meaningful participation in all matters concerning and affecting the upbringing and education of young children. Conspicuous by its absence from the IELS proposal is, for example, the recognition of minority groups and indigenous peoples in OECD countries and beyond (p. 12).

They conclude that the kind of standardised assessment and ranking proposed by IELS

is not going to provide a meaningful basis for achieving more just and equitable outcomes for children, families, and the wider community. Resources will be diverted from much needed local and national improvement processes to creating a largely meaningless international league table instead (p. 10)

The IELS presents one world view, as if it were the only absolute truth. Is it however, as proposed by Morris (2016) a case of ‘the west...

Exporting its vision of schooling around the world through the auspices of cross-national tests supported by the modern missionaries and camp followers of our time: the think tanks and multinational companies who specialize in identifying and delivering ‘what works’ (p.2).

Teaching to the test in Early Childhood

PLÉ believes that ‘what works’ in early childhood is inextricably linked with competent systems which unfold in relationships between individuals, institutions, and governance, based on shared knowledge, practices and values (Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari, and Peeters, 2011) and is therefore, far removed from standardised testing of young children. Consequently, the IELS does not take account of children’s natural learning styles and abilities in the early years, and as stated earlier, it is contrary to the emphasis within the national practice frameworks: Síolta and Aistear on the integrated nature of children’s learning and development during early childhood. Rather than testing children, Aistear for example, supports the notion of assessment, defining it as the ‘ongoing process of **collecting, reflecting on, and using** information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning’ (NCCAb, 2009, p.72). In doing this, the adult working with the young child

Uses the assessment information to give on-going feedback to children about how they are getting on in their learning, to provide challenging and enjoyable experiences for them, to choose appropriate supports for them, and to document, celebrate and plan the next steps in their learning (ibid., p. 73).

The NCCA assert that such assessment benefits, involves and makes sense for children, involves their families, is multi-modal, happens over time, and celebrates the breadth and depth of children's learning and development.

Regrettably, the proposed assessment of young children in the IELS will lead to rankings of ability across particular skills sets as outlined earlier. Within this construct, there will be an inevitable erosion of the period of early childhood, and informal learning in early childhood, a move away from play based pedagogy to a pedagogy of compliance, a re-emergence of rote, and forced learning, and a push-down formalised curriculum, where children risk being pitted against each other, as governments scramble to increase rankings. This is precisely what happened in Ireland, following the ranking of Irish children in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests the skills and knowledge of 15-year-olds. In spite of curriculum overload, (McCoy, Smith and Banks, 2012), Ireland saw fit to publish *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2011) as a conduit to improve PISA rankings. There are concerns that PISA has resulted in a narrowing of children's experiences and opportunities in Irish schools, as teachers prioritise literacy and numeracy, which Sahlberg (2015) notes are particularly suited to global assessment and measurement. As Urban & Swadener (2016) state

A persistent criticism of such league table approaches is that they lend themselves to oversimplification and ignore the reality that different cultural traditions and socio-cultural contexts produce different paradigms, particularly in education.
(p. 9)

Worryingly, the early indications are that the IELS, will eventually result in standardised testing of children at all levels of education, from early childhood through to third level. This intention is clearly signalled within the IELS tender document which states that...

In time, the information [gathered] 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 (p. 103)

The second relationship with PISA is to enable countries to link early learning outcomes to the capabilities of the same cohort of students at age 15. This will give countries greater information on what must be done within the schooling years, to give students a better chance of developing the skills they need and achieving success. If the first early learning outcomes assessment runs in 2017, depending on the age or stage selected for assessment, some of this cohort of students will likely undertake PISA in 2027 (p.110)

According to Morris (2016) the function of metrics and measurements, as proposed through the IELTS, is to provide ‘competitive comparisons’ or ‘comparison advocacy’ harnessed to the task of winning imaginary contests and competitions, such as the global ‘war for talent’, the ‘education race’, and ‘skills race’ (p.3), but at what cost to children?

During a TED talk in February 2017, Ken Robinson argued that ‘kids don’t fail, schools fail kids’, a claim that resonates with Malaguzzi’s assertion that although children have one hundred languages, (i.e., their endless potentials, their ability to wonder and to inquire, and multiple ways of seeing and being), school and culture robs them of ninety-nine. Although this may be an unjust critique of the education system globally, the harsh reality, is, that regardless of a teacher’s best intentions, the IELTS will result in teaching to the test, both inside and outside the classroom at both pre-school and early primary level. Where once parents read bedtime stories to their children, they will now feel compelled to introduce letters and numbers, and test their child’s knowledge and skills acquisition at the youngest age.

Exacerbating Educational Disadvantage and Inequality

In justifying the need for the IELTS, the OECD assert that information on early learning outcomes, could provide parents with reliable information on:

- What practical activities they can undertake with their child that will make a significant difference to their child’s learning and make the most from their ECEC and schooling experiences;
- What age it would be beneficial to enrol their child in an ECEC setting and what is likely to be best in terms of intensity, duration and continuity;
- What kinds of capabilities their child should be building, in both social and emotional and cognitive domains (2016, p.104).

Herein lies a conundrum. Is it not more likely that parents with greater social capital, access to resources, and the wherewithal to access appropriate support, and quality early education for their child, will yet again, have a ‘competitive advantage’ over parents and families living in poverty, or suffering from socio-economic disadvantage? There is every possibility that the IELTS will set children up for failure as early as 4.5 years. Likewise, parents whose children do not ‘make the grade’ will feel equally incompetent. The narrow definition of the context of children’s lives in the IELTS approach leaves little room for considering existing inequality as a factor that influences measurement of the learner. This in itself inequitable and points to a

lack of awareness of the social, cultural, economic and political diversity of families and contexts.

Schoolification of Early Years Education

Given the age cohort identified for assessment by the OECD, PLÉ is concerned about the potential expectation that young children should be engaging in formal academic activities within early years settings, prior to school entry. We believe that we must resist the “schoolification” of early childhood education where early childhood programmes are underpinned by primary school academic activities, and where children spend much of their time indoors, learning letters and numbers in preparation for primary school (OECD, 2006; Moloney, 2011; Pantazis and Potsi, 2012, Ring, Mhic Mhathúna, Moloney, Hayes et al, 2015), rather than the development of social skills, independence, curiosity and child-agency (NCCA, 2009; PACEY, 2013).

It is thought that an early introduction to academic learning is unnecessary and can impact negatively on children’s development (Claxton, 2008; House, 2012). In terms of children’s learning dispositions, Da Ros-Voseles and Fowler-Haughey (2007) argue that when programme expectations “focus primarily on knowledge and skills acquisition, important dispositions are often ignored” (p.3). Similarly, Hatch (2002) asserts that when teachers rely upon drill and decontextualised activities instead of fostering skills development through meaningful integrated learning, the dispositions that children need to learn will likely diminish. As observed by Palmer (2009) ‘It’s time we recognised that too much too soon isn’t working. To give our under-sevens the best chance of growing up bright, balanced and literate we must stop trying to fast-forward their education. (p.1).

Conclusion

The initiation of the International Learning Study (IELS) represents a considerable shift in the OECD’s approach to ECEC, from a focus upon quality (1998 to 2006) towards a discourse of outcomes and investments (Moss et al., 2016). The OECD tender for the IELS leaves little doubt that the primary consideration relates to return on investment. While the domains to be assessed through the IELS, i.e., Self-regulation; oral language, emergent literacy, numeracy, executive function, self-awareness/locus of control, and social skills are described as representing a balance of cognitive and social and emotional skills (OECD, IELS tender, 2016), the level of detail associated with each domain, strongly indicates that the pre-dominant emphasis upon cognitive development. Furthermore, it is evident that the

IELS will eventually lead to standardised testing of children at all levels of education, beginning in early childhood. This objective which is concerned with comparative education is clearly flagged within the IELS tender document.

In relation to Ireland, the IELS contradicts the approach to children's learning and development proposed within the national practice Frameworks for quality and curriculum, *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Assessment of and for learning, as proposed within *Aistear*, benefits, involves and makes sense for children, involves their families, uses multiple methods of inquiry, happens over time, and celebrates the breadth and depth of children's learning and development. Conversely, the IELS does not take account of children's natural learning styles and abilities in the early years, focussing instead upon international rankings of ability across particular skills sets. Worryingly, this is a regressive step in the history of the OECD's overall positive relationship with ECEC, and will inevitably result in a narrowing of children's experiences and opportunities in early years settings. The risk is that early childhood education will become schoolified at pre-school level, with the resultant erosion of play, and a re-emergence of rote learning. Educators will engage in a pedagogy of compliance; teaching to the test, rather than celebrating children's exploration, discovery, mastery, fun, and joyful learning which lie at the core of learning in early childhood. Equally parents will feel pressured to prepare children for the IELS, and where once, they read bedtime stories to their children, they will now feel compelled to introduce letters and numbers, and test their child's knowledge and skills acquisition. Not only will the IELS set young children up for failure from the youngest age, parents whose children do not 'make the grade' will feel equally incompetent.

Rather than attempting to fast-forward children's education (Palmer, 2009), it is time to put play back into early childhood education, and redirect attention towards competent systems. In fact, it is imperative that the OECD revisits its original concern for quality, and moves away from approaches that are poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children (OECD, 2006), and which pose a threat to the nature and period of early childhood into the future.

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