

The OECD and IELTS: Redefining early childhood education for the 21st century

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Abstract

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has unveiled plans to move into the field of early childhood education through the introduction of the International Early Learning Study (IELS), a new comparative test of five-year olds that is being piloted in three nations. This article explores the dynamics of this new project and serves three purposes. First, we situate IELS within the OECD's broader agenda in education governance, and with regard to its existing comparative assessments, namely the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Second, we identify the main commentaries and critiques of the OECD's activity and assessments, specifically relating to PISA. In the concluding section we anticipate a possible future when such tests are established in the early childhood education sector and reflect on its possible impact. We argue that the advent of comparative testing of five-year olds heralds an attempt to introduce a new paradigm for early childhood education, one which stresses cognitive skills and children's role as future sources of human capital.

Keywords

International Early Learning Study, OECD, governance, early childhood education

Introduction

In their classic comparative studies, Joseph Tobin et al. (1989, 2009) demonstrated how Kindergartens reflect and reproduce the prevailing social mores and values within societies. For example, in Japan the size of classes was large and the role of the teacher relatively low key, features which were seen as vital to help the children develop the skills to interact with each other. In contrast, in the USA smaller class sizes were valued as this allowed more opportunities for interaction with the teacher and facilitated the development of each child's individuality. This diversity across different societies is more pronounced than between other levels of schooling as Kindergartens play a vital role in early socialisation and, relative to other levels of schooling, their curricula are not constructed around subjects that are primarily derived from academic disciplines (e.g. maths and science).

This diversity across nations is compounded by the very different ages when pupils start to attend early childhood education (ECE) and the range of different curriculum models they follow. As Sousa et al. (2019) show in this volume, in Portugal all aspects of ECE are heavily influenced by the nation's quest since 1974 to promote and establish democracy; in the Nordic nations ECE has stressed the role of play and children's social development; in much of East Asia, ECE has focused on promoting children's cognitive development and preparing them for primary schooling. However, there is also a wide diversity of approaches within

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nations, in which curricular models such as those based on Montessori, Froebel, Reggio Emilia and Steiner operate alongside state mandated models in many nations. In addition, opinion varies within and across nations as to whether ECE should primarily focus on developing 'young children' or preparing them as sources of future 'human capital'.

The above preamble highlights the fundamental problems inherent in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) plan to introduce the International Early Learning Study (IELS), a standardised test that will measure the performance of children aged five around the world (it is being piloted in England, the USA and Estonia). International large-scale assessments (ILSAs) have been subject to intense scrutiny, and two questions are particularly critical given that the testing is to be extended into ECE: (a) Can we meaningfully use a single instrument to measure and compare schooling in societies that exhibit such a diversity of goals and practices? (b) How will the comparative data be used when it is eventually reported to a global audience? The widespread recognition of these fundamental issues was illustrated by the response of some of the nations invited to join IELS (e.g. New Zealand and Germany), which expressed bewilderment at the idea and declined to participate (see Sousa et al. this volume).

We refer to IELS intentionally as a form of testing, though the OECD prefers to use a variety of euphemisms, such as studying or comparing children's 'learning', 'development' and 'wellbeing'. Despite the shift in terminology, the OECD has presented the results of its other testing programmes in the form of comparative league tables, and IELS will, if successful, inevitably follow this pattern. The rankings will provide a basis for identifying 'best practices' and instigating processes of reform, as ECE provision is amenable to direct policy actions (more so than child rearing practices or social deprivation) and the OECD's core business is promoting 'Better Policies for Better Lives'. Although the OECD does not have a formal mandate for international assessment, the organisation is committed to extending and consolidating its influence through the medium of ILSAs (see Addey, 2017). The ultimate goal is stated as having 170 nations participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by 2030 (Ward, 2016), and for all nations to measure progress using this universal yardstick of education quality.

The OECD has used its ILSAs to create a standardised global definition of the purpose of schooling – portraying it primarily as an investment in human capital through the inculcation of '21st Century skills' – and its goal is to align education systems with that vision. Drawing on analyses of the OECD's strategic agenda and the impact of PISA on education research, policy and schooling (Auld and Morris, 2014, 2016), we interpret the development of IELS as an attempt to introduce a 'new paradigm' in ECE and outline its basic characteristics. We then summarise the major commentaries and critiques of PISA, presenting these as harbingers of the issues which ECE will face, with a particular focus on: (a) the core assumptions and underlying logic; (b) the specific methods and indicators developed by OECD (namely, PISA); and (c) how the comparative data is used to develop 'best practices', and then translated into policy. Finally, we anticipate the potential impact of IELS on research, policy and practice.

IELS: A new paradigm for ECE?

The OECD presents a basic outline of its rationale and approach to the study on its website (OECD, n.d.), which notes the astonishing rate of development during a child's early years when the brain 'is at its highest point of plasticity than at any other point in our lifetime'. Highlighting consensus among experts, the OECD identifies ECE as 'a holistic concept that involves developing cognitive and social-emotional skills that are inter-related and mutually reinforcing', and states that IELS 'takes a comprehensive approach to studying a broad scope of developmental domains that are widely recognised as key early learning and development skills'. Although the organisation has elsewhere insisted that the study will not be used to compare outcomes as in other ILSAs, cursory reading of the promotional literature (OECD, n.d.) reveals that the design and goals of IELS are in line with the organisation's existing PISA assessment. The OECD lists the expected beneficiaries of IELS as children, family, Early Childhood Education Centres and schools, as well as countries as a whole. Clarifying its expected impact across the aforementioned beneficiaries, it states, 'Firstly, and most importantly, [IELS] will benefit children by shedding light on the factors that foster and hinder their development that could then be used to create environments better suited to children's needs' (OECD, n.d.). The OECD website continues by clarifying that this would be achieved by exerting an influence

on schooling, whereby 'schools will be able to make more informed decisions about the curricula and pedagogical practices likely to be needed based on information from the Study'. To facilitate this improvement, the OECD expects IELS to influence research in ECE, stating that 'researchers in the field of early education will have valid and comparable information on children's characteristics obtained from a range of sources'. That is, research will increasingly be framed by the comparative data provided by IELS. In turn, by providing policymakers with 'a snapshot of children's skills as well as the setting and practices that support and hinder these skills', the OECD claims that IELS will 'give them the opportunity to design better policies aimed at promoting these factors in home and early childhood education environments that are found to be related with better learning outcomes'. Finally, justifying the comparative element, the organisation states that 'countries will also be able to compare findings in order to learn from each other and share best practices, while taking into account specificities of their local cultural and institutional contexts'.

All of this is directly in line with the existing PISA assessments, and in keeping with the organisational motto, Better (ECE) Policies for Better Lives. This apparent alignment is identified more concretely by Moss et al. (2016), who characterise IELS as a 'pre-school PISA', drawing attention to the OECD's (2015a) call for tenders, which stated,

In time, the information (provided by IELS) 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. (103)

In this respect, the introduction and impact of IELS can be understood within the OECD's broader agenda, and the organisation's instrumental role in promoting a 'new paradigm' for education research and policy (Auld and Morris, 2014). That agenda is now being extended through its stated vision of introducing a 'new paradigm for development', under which the organisation will use a new test for low- and middle-income countries (PISA for Development¹) to track progress on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the OECD Learning Framework 2030 (see OECD, 2018). Situating IELS within this broader organisational agenda, we characterise IELS as the first step in an attempt to introduce a 'new paradigm for ECE', and argue that the shape and features of this nascent paradigm can be anticipated with regard to the OECD's existing logic and goals, namely: (a) a universal standard of education quality; (b) a cognitive-economic model of education, supplemented with a focus on non-cognitive dimensions such as well-being, global competence and social and emotional skills; (c) alignment of national and/or regional level assessments with a global standard; (d) a global policy network, and transfer of 'best practice'; (5) increased private sector involvement in each stage of the process (i.e. measurement, analysis, reform); (6) (for 'developing' nations) incentivised compliance and punitive accountability (Auld et al., 2018).

In the sections that follow, we review the extensive critiques and commentaries that have been focused on PISA across the areas upon which the OECD has stated that IELS is expected to have an impact, and which interrogate the assumptions and aims that underpin the project.

Universal standard of quality: A 'global yardstick' for education

The OECD describes PISA as a 'global yardstick', which rests on the assumption that the aims and outcomes of education systems are directly commensurable and can thereby be accurately – and meaningfully – captured on a normative scale. As Kamens and McNeely (2010: 8) note, 'in a world where national educational systems are viewed as unique in structure, history, and purpose, international testing would have little plausibility'. Although education systems, and the societies in which they are embedded, are not entirely unique, the field of comparative education has traditionally emphasised cultural aspects of education systems (e.g. Alexander, 2000), and a significant body of research has questioned the ambition of developing a universal standard of 'quality' (e.g. Biesta, 2010). Despite such concerns, the construction of a universal standard is central to the project of 'governing by numbers' (Grek, 2009), or 'cognitive governance' (Woodward, 2009), whereby the OECD uses assessment to engender a sense of community among members (and non-members).

Gorur (2014, 2015) explores the development of the OECD's comparative assessments and 'Education at a Glance' series, portraying them as the construction of 'calculable worlds'. A key insight is presented by Woolgar (1991), who highlights the core supposition of this process as the existence of a 'transcendental object' to be measured. Unlike competitor assessments, the OECD sought to overcome this problem by positioning PISA as curriculum independent, and as a measure of 21st century skills (Schleicher, 2018). As the assessment is intended to transcend culture and operate independently of curriculum and schooling, the relevance of the measurements must therefore be situated within a broader framing of the world situation, which centres on the emergence of a hyper-competitive global knowledge economy. An example of the OECD's vision of the present and future is laid out in its Lessons from PISA for Japan (2012).

Rapid globalisation and modernisation are posing new and demanding challenges to individuals and societies alike. . . In a globalised world, people compete for jobs not just locally but inter- nationally. In this integrated worldwide labour market, highly-paid workers in wealthier countries are competing directly with people with much the same skills in lower-wage countries. The same is true for people with low skills. The competition among countries now revolves around the quality of their human capital. . . This is not a description of one possible future, but of the economic dynamics that are now in play. . . The implication is that the yardstick for educational success is no longer simply improvement against national standards, but against the best- performing education systems worldwide. (16)

To demonstrate the necessity of PISA, education is defined with regard to the instrumental role that it plays in developing the human capital necessary to compete with the global competition. The OECD must then demonstrate the ability of PISA to capture and quantify this supreme good, an association that has been carefully cultivated in collaboration with the World Bank in recent years, and Eric Hanushek in particular (see Auld et al., 2018; Komatsu and Rappleye, 2017). This association is regularly promoted by Andreas Schleicher, who explains, 'According to one estimate, if all 15-year-olds in the OECD area attained at least level 2 in the PISA mathematics assessment, they would contribute over USD 200 trillion in additional economic output over their working lives' (2014a: 21). The source of these claims is another OECD report (2010), an example of the closed circle of internal referencing used to reinforce the legitimacy of the organisation's indicators, and which are often picked up uncritically by politicians, media and scholars alike (see Grey and Morris, 2018). A more recent report (OECD, 2015b) reasserted the economic gains to be made by countries at all levels, for example,

24% of 15-year olds in the United States do not successfully complete even the basic Level 1 PISA tasks. If the United States were to ensure that all students meet the goal of universal basic skills, the economic gains could reach over USD 27 trillion in additional income for the American economy over the working life of these students. (10)

This association was also extended to low and middle-income countries, and duly referenced to promote the rationale for PISA for Development in another report commissioned by the OECD (Lockheed et al., 2015), which was in turn referenced by Schleicher and Costin² (2015) in support of the initiative (see Auld et al., 2018, for details). Ultimately, this internally constructed evidence base is used to strengthen the OECD's assertion that 'values and preferences evolve, and education systems must change to accommodate them' (OECD, 2012: 23). Once the calculable world is established, other considerations are acknowledged but duly subordinated, and the aims and purposes of education are redefined to align with the system. This objective is clearly stated in the OECD's (2011) plans for a 'new paradigm for development' and confirmed in Addey's (2017) interviews with OECD officials. More directly, the OECD – and Andreas Schleicher in particular – has consistently lauded the integration of PISA components into national-level curriculum (e.g. OECD, 2012; Schleicher, 2018).

There is a basic pattern to the moves employed: (a) strategic portrayal of the world situation, demonstrating the necessity of standardised measurement to facilitate comparison; (b) identification of the core concept (e.g. cognitive ability) and development of a measurement of this concept (e.g. PISA scores); (c) position the measurement as curriculum independent (i.e. transcending curricula and context); (d) assert an association between the measurement and the greater good (e.g. economic prosperity). A final move (e), promoting a 'change in values' and aligning the system with measurement (e.g. introduction of PISA elements into curriculum), will be explored below. Regardless of the concept being defined and measured, this process of normalisation remains the same. We anticipate a similar process unfolding with regard to IELTS, which has been promoted as a preparatory indicator that will help nations improve their PISA scores.

Operating as a pre-PISA indicator, IELTS is also being positioned as transcending school curricula and the various ECE traditions. The OECD claims that ‘The stories and games in which children engage have little resemblance with usual school material’, and goes on to assert that IELTS is ‘not an assessment of school readiness’, and ‘although the information from the Study will be useful for schools to better understand early learners’ needs, the Study is focused on children’s longer-term outcomes in a wide scope of life domains’ (OECD, n.d.). A number of issues deserve critical attention: (a) the nature of the narrative upon which the datasets are constructed; (b) the technical construction of the datasets; (c) philosophical concerns and aspects of education that are excluded from the calculable world. These are considered below, focusing on the cognitive assessments and the measures of wellbeing upon which IELTS will focus.

Constructing worlds: critical perspectives

Education ‘quality’ and economic performance: doubts on PISA’s relevance

Brown and Lauder argue that ‘the rise in the value of knowledge, predicted by commentators in the West, [has] failed to materialize’ (2012: 5), and although the OECD claims its datasets capture all-important ‘21st century skills’, it is not clear that employers are actively seeking the cognitive competencies measured by PISA. Employers routinely identify team- work, collaboration and oral communication skills as amongst the most valuable yet hard- to-find qualities in workers (e.g. Casner-Lotto and Barrington, 2006; Jerald, 2009). In 2015, employers in the USA surveyed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2015) listed ‘ability to work in a team’ as the most desirable attribute of new college graduates, ahead of problem-solving and analytical/quantitative skills. Similarly, Deming (2015) argues that social skills are a more powerful predictor of workers’ productivity and that advances in technology have primarily reduced jobs which require cognitive skills, rather than those which require social skills.³

Claims that economic development would result directly from investing in education and upgrading skills are, according to Wolf (2004), ‘nonsense’, since they ignore the influence of other factors (such as economic policies, institutional capacity, capital investment and natural resources). Conducting longitudinal analysis on the available data, Kamens (2015) tracked the relationship between ILSAs (PISA-type assessments) and economic growth across 60 nations in the period since 1963, but found no significant correlations at the macro level, concluding: ‘Countries with higher test scores . . . are not more likely to experience later higher economic growth’ (441). More recently, Komatsu and Rappleye (2017) analysed the same PISA data used by Hanushek et al. (OECD, 2010, 2015b), which the OECD cites as evidence for the impact of PISA scores on subsequent economic growth. Having extended the scope to adjust for a more appropriate time-frame, they found no significant correlation, describing the claims underpinning the OECD’s cognitive-economic model as based on ‘flawed statistics’.

While Lingard and Rizvi (2010) characterise the global knowledge economy as a ‘neo- liberal imaginary’, at the very least the causal claims made regarding the economic relevance of PISA are contradicted by the evidence. This brings us to an even more fundamental issue, and one of particular relevance for ECE and the IELTS project.

Universal wellbeing: cultural difference and philosophical questions

The OECD has recently attempted to extend PISA beyond its cognitive-economic focus. Sahlberg and Hargreaves (in Strauss, 2015) argued that, although the tower of PISA is in danger of toppling, we should look for positives and focus on refining the indicators rather than reject them. In particular, they commend the OECD’s move towards measuring ‘well- being’ and ‘happiness’, highlighting the relatively strong performance of certain western and Latin American societies on this measure (‘high satisfaction’). This is contrasted with their East Asian peers, who fare better on the cognitive tests, but who are apparently ‘less satisfied’ with their lives and more stressed. IELTS will also include a focus on wellbeing, but this optimism regarding a new age of comparative assessment appears ill-founded.

Rappleye et al. (forthcoming) demonstrate that the OECD’s indicators of ‘wellbeing’ are constructed using a concept of self, and the relation between the self and the wider society (e.g. ‘mental autonomy’, and ‘individuality’), that stand in direct contradiction to prevailing cultural views on wellbeing in East Asia. Rappleye et al. then present an inter-relational happiness index, developed by Japanese researchers and

based on East Asian concepts of self, highlighting that when this measure is used the outcomes are duly inverted. As they point out, it is the measurement that creates the 'reality' of low life satisfaction in East Asia, further noting that the assessment merely extends the same parochialism of the PISA cognitive-economic assessments into non-cognitive realms of education where it is potentially even more damaging.

The absence of any engagement with these substantive issues and the questionable inferences that are subsequently drawn are particularly important when considering the possible implications of IELS, which focuses on 'wellbeing' and will be positioned as a 'global' yardstick of education quality. Moreover, the identified parochialism is a considered and self-aware decision, one that recurs across reports and which is taken to preserve the organisational goal. Gorur's (2014) interviews with OECD analysts reveal how such philosophical questions as to what constitutes 'quality' and 'equity' were acknowledged and then effectively 'boxed up' to enable the project to proceed. Regarding equity, an OECD analyst explained,

It is a very philosophical issue and we are the OECD. . . [we did not want to get] involved in a huge philosophical discussion on what is equity and what it is not, so we went for definitions that can be defined with our indicators and that are simple to understand and clear... After looking at the research, the philosophical research literature, we decided that we couldn't go in there. (Gorur, 2014: 62)

This focus on the easily measurable facilitates the construction of an internally coherent system, while obfuscating critical differences. Clarifying the domains that will be assessed within the measures of cognitive and socio-emotional skills on IELS, the OECD (n.d.) notes that,

... notwithstanding the inevitable fact that these skills are a selection of a much broader pool of children's emerging skillsets, they represent a balanced set of cognitive and social and emotional skills that are to be found of special relevance for children's lives and long-term wellbeing.

Here we have early signs of the approach outlined above, acknowledging the limited scope and the philosophical debates regarding ECE before settling on 'definitions that can be defined by the OECD indicators'. Although the field of ECE has long been characterised by very different conceptions of the nature of childhood and ECE provision, we anticipate the OECD's refrain upon the release of the findings: values and preferences evolve, and education systems must change to accommodate them.

A global policy network: 'best practice' and ECE

In this section we will focus more directly on the use of comparative data to identify policy lessons, which was clearly stated as a goal of IELS.

The identification of policy lessons generally takes the problematic form of identifying 'best practices' in high-performing or improving systems and transferring these to another society with the expectation that it will induce a similar effect on education performance. The fundamental problem is identified by Biesta (2010), who notes that the discussion about 'what works' operates on the assumption of a closed, deterministic system, whereas education is an open system, in that it is characterised by a degree of interaction with its environment, a problem that is exacerbated across societies in which education has different aims. The introduction of comparative data represents a preliminary attempt to construct and normalise a closed system. A secondary problem then emerges, namely: 'Whilst identifying policies for transfer relies on straightforward and generalisable causal claims that focus on school systems' practices and structures, the reasons underlying different levels of pupil achievement are inherently complex and explanations are conditional' (Auld and Morris, 2016: 202).

A number of critiques have drawn attention to these issues and analysed influential reports (e.g. Alexander, 2010; Coffield, 2012). More generally, Auld and Morris (2016) illustrate the repertoire of moves that analysts use to develop a narrative of control, arguing that the 'strategies combine to create a system that is closed conceptually, collapsing complexity and reinterpreting the nature of social reality to enable the delivery of the research ambition' (224). For example: the OECD express awareness of the issues that prevent the delivery of their research ambition, explicitly highlighting the problems of culture and of

establishing causality, but then marginalise these concerns and deliver qualified prescriptions for transfer nonetheless. These qualifications and caveats, included as a ritual genuflection, are duly disregarded in conclusions, and are picked up and presented as prescriptions of 'best practice' in subsequent reports. Despite emphasising his scientific background, Andreas Schleicher (e.g. 2018) regularly references entrepreneurial academics and consultancy reports that arrive at conclusions through a blend of intuition and speculation.

Although the OECD (2013b) claims that it merely aims to 'stimulate discussion', the organisation actively promotes specific reforms, and Andreas Schleicher (e.g. 2014a) regularly adorns public forums offering his 'pointers for policy and practice'. Reports stop short of making direct causal claims and instead make hanging observations, leaving the reader to infer a causal connection while protecting themselves from critique. An example is,

... while the causal nature of such relationships might not be established, an extensive web of correlations can be drawn between certain dimensions of student performance and a large range of factors that could conceivably affect that performance. (OECD, 2012: 23)

The range of factors that conceivably affect performance are duly presented as lessons for policymakers. Other studies make similar qualifications about causality, but aim to 'show educators, policy makers and the interested public how education systems are similar and different' (OECD, 2013a: 14). These hanging observations are readily inflated into causal claims in the hands of policymakers, media and uncritical scholarship.

Although critiques of reports claiming to identify 'best practice' are important, they are also an indication that the assessment has infiltrated the policy domain. Once the assessment is established, researchers who originally questioned the very basis for comparison are drawn into levelling realist critiques and entering debates over the reasons for high performance, implicitly reinforcing the measurement's legitimacy as a basis for comparison. The move to this stage heralds the next phase in the introduction of a new paradigm, and the redefinition of education and its purposes 'for the 21st century'.

Engaging with critique

The previous sections explored how comparative data is used to construct closed systems that redefine the nature and purpose of education, transcending societies and traditions before promoting a realignment of values. Limitations in the datasets are acknowledged as necessarily imperfect, but positioned as improving with each round (i.e. reality is progressively unfolded), and broader debate on education's fundamental purposes is precluded. A secondary phase then unfolds in the interpretation of rankings, and the identification of lessons 'for policy and practice' that are designed to improve performance on the new measure. Although the OECD consulted with governments over the introduction of IELTS, scholars have highlighted the lack of engagement with the wider ECE community, openly opposing the project (e.g. Henderson et al., 2017) and questioning the undemocratic nature of the process (e.g.). ECE practitioners may hold out hope for constructive dialogue over IELTS once it has been established, but prior experience suggests this is unlikely.

Hopmann and Brinek (2007: 13–14) detailed the German PISA consortium's response to their invitation to contribute to a volume engaging critically with PISA. They claimed that the first response was silence, with one member of the consortium stating that engaging would merely 'provide a forum for unproven allegations'. The next response was to raise doubts about the motives and abilities of critics, arguing that they 'were unqualified to discuss PISA', and that 'they were probably driven by envy or other non-scholarly motives'. Next, they would acknowledge some issues, but 'insist that they are very limited in nature and scope', or 'that these problems are well known within large-scale survey research of the kind like PISA, and even unavoidable when working comparatively'. Finally, they would dismiss the criticism as 'nothing new', and 'nothing that has not been dealt with within the PISA research itself', referring to 'opaque technical reports... or to unpublished papers or reports'.

Hopmann and Brinek liken the organisation's approach to that of pharmaceutical companies, and explain,

PISA has a large 'market share' to defend: most of public money spent on educational research nowadays is being put into PISA and similar approaches (the standards and testing business); many chairs in education have turned to related topics and issues, thus providing a significant market for collaborators in the field. This is all too big and too seductive to be put at risk just because of a few other scholars who do not support the whole enterprise or the way it is done. (15)

As the global testing industry gains traction and is tied to research funding, the rewards for framing research with regard to the assessments have proven seductive for a field that has existed on the fringes for so long. The fundamental premise goes largely unquestioned as debate is focused on technical issues. An example of this is found in Schleicher's response to an article titled 'Is PISA fundamentally flawed?' (Stewart, 2014), which drew on the work of a number of academics. Schleicher (TES, 2015) moved to discredit the contributors: 'Professors Kreiner and Christensen suggest in their report. . . that there should be no variability in performance on individual questions between students in different countries. Little consideration is needed to realise that this idea is nonsense'. Morrison, who raised philosophical objections to the Rasch model underlying the PISA survey design, is similarly dismissed.

He does not show any knowledge of the methods used in the Pisa survey and does not refer to any of the technical literature on Pisa. It is difficult to see how his paper can be considered relevant to the methodological debate.

Schleicher's (2014c) response to an open letter published in the Guardian (Andrews et al., 2014) was similarly dismissive: 'The letter by Dr Heinz-Dieter Meyer and other academics. . . makes a series of false claims regarding the OECD's PISA programme'. Schleicher went on to claim that the signatories had either misrepresented or misunderstood the organisation's intent, operations and influence. Any research that questions: what is measured; why or how it is measured; the assessment's foundations in human capital theory; or its culturally bound nature is marginalised. Thus, the segments of reality that are omitted from the calculable world are suppressed to sustain the coherence of the story, and to establish a concrete measure of 'quality'. The overarching goal is placed beyond reproach, and only technical questions are permitted. This was very evident in England, in which the Department for Education's Advisory Committee on IELTS was established after the decision to participate in the pilot project, where its role was only to advise on its implementation.

Consequences and impact

While the agenda is clear, the key question that arises is: if IELTS is established, how will governments respond? For education systems that do not rank in the top tier in IELTS, it is reasonable to infer that a great crisis in ECE is on the horizon (e.g. the 'PISA Shocks' in Denmark and Germany), one which may in turn be used to demonstrate the necessity of education reform. Although reactions have varied widely, in many cases the impact has been significant. Michael Gove, the former Secretary of State for Education in England, lauded the OECD's Andreas Schleicher as 'The father of more revolutions than any German since Karl Marx' (Gove, 2013), and Schleicher (2018) has himself argued that one of the main benefits of PISA is its capacity to act as a catalyst for change. IELTS will enable policymakers to refer to 'global standards' and 'international evidence' in support of their agendas, transferring the locus of authority 'around the globe' to bypass domestic opposition (Rapple, 2012).

While in many cases public officials marshal evidence selectively to pursue pre-existing agendas (Morris, 2012; You and Morris, 2015), experience from existing ISLAs, especially PISA, is that policies/reforms are often designed to directly improve test scores. The measure of performance then becomes the target and the result confirms Goodhart's law, which claims that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. This is because those affected by targets anticipate its effect and take actions which alter its outcome, effectively 'gaming the system'. Examples of such actions introduced to improve scores on ISLAs have included: training teachers to coach pupils on how to pass the test; increasing the time allocated to areas tested by reducing the time spent on other areas; aligning existing national systems of inspection and accountability to the test; modifying the curriculum content to better align with the test; and ensuring pupils are motivated to take the test.

England adopted the second and third strategies with an alignment of school monitoring systems to prioritise the areas assessed by PISA, resulting in a significant reduction of time for music, art and PE. Such responses were not limited to England. The OECD notes approvingly that ‘Germany, Japan and the US state of Oregon have embedded PISA items in their national/state assessments’ (2012: 23). Kazakhstan introduced the first strategy. Israel adopted the third strategy, modifying its maths curriculum to better align with the TIMSS test. Subsequently, its performance on that test improved significantly in 2011 but its performance on PISA and on national tests did not show comparable improvement. Whilst these policy responses may improve test scores, it is unclear how they enhance the quality of education. As Feniger (2018) notes, the impact of ILSAs is to frame educational policy so as to create a tunnel vision effect that restricts policymakers’ attention to finding ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ defined by the tests themselves, which ensures that more complex and fundamental policy issues (e.g. poverty, access, health and social deprivation) are ignored.

Perhaps the most profound influence on researchers in ECE will be on their own research, with shifting expectations regarding what is deemed useful. With a ‘new global policy network’ extending into ECE, research funding will increasingly be allocated towards desk-based comparative studies that offer speculative interpretations of the IELS data, and which translate into easily digestible causal stories that support policy initiatives. Debate will be framed by the researchers and entrepreneurs who offer such explanations, and private entities will be heavily involved in this industry. Reports will provide an overview of different societies and their education systems (ECE at a glance), offering explanations for high performance while insisting that they are not causal explanations or prescriptions of ‘best practice’. In contrast, research that deals with different ECE traditions, or that entertains ‘outdated’ notions about the cultural specificity of ECE, will be marginalised. In short, to future generations of ECE researchers, the question, ‘What is the best ECE system in the world?’ may be more commonplace than contentious.

The scenario laid out above remains speculative but draws on processes already set in motion by the regular PISA assessment and initiatives clearly stated in the OECD’s strategic agenda. Following this trajectory, ECE may receive some welcome publicity, but the issues and solutions will increasingly be framed by IELS.

Conclusion

The OECD’s broader agenda and its repertoire for introducing, extending and entrenching its assessments, is now well-rehearsed, permitting tentative speculation on the future of IELS. The first step rests on demonstrating the necessity of the task, securing a critical mass of participants to enable the organisation to run a pilot round. This has already been achieved. Next comes the construction of a measurement that transcends school curricula and ECE traditions, and which is positioned as having deeper significance in the context of the unique challenges presented by the 21st century. This is well underway. Debate will be focused on technical and methodological issues, subordinating fundamental concerns about the purposes of ECE. Once the pilot round is complete, OECD technicians will attest that, while necessarily imperfect, the project has shown enough promise to merit further rounds of assessment. The indicators will be refined, cultural aspects of education and society will be acknowledged and then marginalised, and IELS will be positioned as a universal measure of ‘quality’ ECE.

The results will be organised into league tables, and systems will duly be identified as ‘high’ and ‘low’ performers, and everything in between. There will be ‘shocks’ and there will be ‘successes’, and the results will be used by policymakers to initiate reform. Sophisticated dissemination and marketing strategies will be used to ensure media impact and foster public interest, and education debate in the public and political arena will be narrowly framed around the test results. Regardless of performance, ECE systems will be cast into a competitive ‘improvement journey’. A parallel industry of experts will emerge to interpret results, offering their solutions and services to improve performance on the assessment. Features outside of schools and different ECE traditions will be acknowledged but then subordinated, and speculative observations in these reports will be re-interpreted as causal claims by media and politicians and presented as practices that ‘work’. As highlighted above, these may be selectively referenced in support of pre-existing agendas and to bypass domestic opposition.

When IELS enters the public and policy domain, the OECD will have achieved its goal. The impact of this 'new paradigm' on ECE practitioners will potentially be significant. In certain societies, ECE provision will be oriented towards improvement on the indicators, and 'success stories' in subsequent rounds will be used to demonstrate that improvement on their selected measurement is indeed possible. In practice this will mean a greater focus on the cognitive dimensions that IELS will measure; namely, 'emerging' literacy and numeracy, with a reduction in time for a more holistic curriculum that encourages play and social development. As argues with reference to England, IELS will reinforce,

... the dominant 'neo-liberal' economic thinking driving recent early education policy [that] treats education precisely as a commodity to be marketed, focused on developing not 'young children' but 'human capital' to fuel an economy based on individualism, competition, marketization and consumerism. (19)

In this respect, the OECD's IELS represents an attempt to redefine the nature of ECE, and childhood itself. Though the final outcome of the project is far from clear, the contours of the vision are clearly marked.

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Notes

1. PISA for Development is currently being piloted in eight countries, with the results due to be released in December 2018 (see Auld et al. (2018) for discussion). This pilot exercise will then be used to enhance participation of more low- and middle-income nations in the regular PISA cycle from 2021, which will be allied to the OECD Learning Framework to track progress on the UN's SDGs.
2. Claudia Costin was Senior Director for Education at the World Bank between 2014 and 2016, and currently works for the Innovation and Excellence in Education Policies think tank.
3. Notably, as part of the assessment's ever-evolving design, the 2015 PISA cycle includes a focus on collaborative problem-solving, in keeping with Schleicher's (2018) assertion that PISA must evolve. The report is available online at: www.oecd.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-v-9789264285521-en.htm.

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