

Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation ^[1]

A comment on the OECD initiative to launch an International Early Learning Study (IELS)

Author: Urban, M. & Swadener, B. B.

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Abstract

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has initiated a process to develop and pilot an international comparative assessment of learning outcomes for young children aged 4.5 to 5.5 years. The International Early Learning Study (IELS) has received little attention from early childhood scholars and practitioners due not least to the absence of a meaningful consultation process. In this paper, written on behalf of the international Reconceptualising Early Childhood (RECE) network, we argue that research evidence that draws large-scale standardised assessment and comparison of young children into question is not taken into account by the proponents of IELS. We express our concern that IELS confirms the OECD's renunciation of the more contextually sensitive approach to understanding early childhood systems that underpinned earlier studies, in particular Start-ing Strong I+II. We argue that emerging resistance from the field against decontextualized standardised assessment of children, and the nature of the information gathered will render IELS results largely meaningless for the stated purpose of improving early childhood experiences for all children. The paper concludes with a call for supporting competent systems, democratic accountability and systemic evaluation.

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