

Analysis: What is 'baby PISA'? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When the media runs headlines such as 'UK schools falling behind leading countries', the stories are often based on data mined from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The three-yearly assessment of 15-year-olds is carried out in an increasing number of countries, and is regarded as a benchmark by which governments can compare their education systems. Not everyone is in favour, with opponents focusing on the programme's narrow range and promotion of standardised testing.

Now the body behind PISA, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is set to launch an international assessment of early learning outcomes among five-year-olds. Sometimes referred to by the early years sector as 'mini-PISA' or 'baby PISA', the study will take place in 2018 and 2019 across three to six countries, and a report is set to be published in 2020.

The list of participating countries has not yet been finalised but, says Milos Kankaras, policy analyst at OECD, 'England and Wales are some of the countries that have shown interest'. The DfE would not confirm participation in the study, citing pre-election rules on policy announcements.

Measures for this assessment will be determined by the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS). Its aim is to identify key factors that drive or hinder the development of early learning, both at home and in early childhood education programmes. It will assess children's emerging literacy and numeracy skills, self-regulation and social and emotional skills, but will not assess reading and writing specifically - the OECD has said it is not an assessment of school readiness but of more long-term outcomes.

Up to 15 children from at least 200 randomly selected schools and other settings in each participating country will take part. The children will carry out four 15-minute one-to-one assessments over two days, covering literacy, numeracy, executive function and empathy and trust. A study administrator will note their observations.

'The assessment material is in the process of development, but direct assessment will be delivered on tablets in the form of stories and games adjusted to this age group,' says Mr Kankaras. 'Indirect assessment and collection of other background information will be in the form of questionnaires for parents, early years staff and study administrators.' Participating children will be asked if they liked the assessment activity, and these debriefing sessions will be used to ensure well-being during the assessment and provide feedback.

The study is designed to inform policy and practice, with the hope that the findings will be used to improve the early learning environment at home and in settings, develop better parenting programmes and identify the types of settings that are most conducive to early learning. The OECD hopes to gain data that will allow countries to share best practice. However, not everyone in the early years sector is in favour of the project.

PRIMARY CONCERNS

Dr Ian Barron, vice-chair of the Early Childhood Degree Studies Network (ECDSN), has written to education minister Justine Greening setting out concerns held by three organisations: ECDSN, association for professional development in the early years TACTYC, and the Sector Endorsed Foundation Degrees in Early Years Professional Association (SEFDEY). Professor Matthias Urban, director of the University of Roehampton's Early Childhood Research Centre, and the Institute of Education's Professor Peter Moss, have met with the OECD and the DfE to highlight their own concerns.

'Our primary concern is the secrecy around the whole thing,' says Dr Barron. 'There has been a lack of dialogue with the sector.'

'We are always asked whether we are against this kind of international assessment altogether, or quantitative research in general, but that is not the case here,' says Professor Urban. 'However, we think there are several arguments against this particular approach.'

One argument is that the IELTS reduces the diversity of early childhood care and education to a common standard. 'Children exist in a particular community and context, and the idea that you can develop a tablet-based assessment that could be used anywhere is worrying,' says Dr Barron.

'It risks losing sight of the workings of very diverse and complex systems in the various countries because it has to produce a level of comparability,' agrees Professor Urban. 'That kind of study is not going to lead to much useful information, and it's highly questionable how much policy learning is going to happen as a result.'

'We can learn from PISA - it is rare to see policies developed or altered as a result of its findings; policy-makers very selectively use the evidence to underpin what they were going to do anyway.'

The OECD says the aim of the study is not to find 'a one size fits all' approach to early childhood care and education. 'This would not make much sense given that at this age many of these children would not be attending their current centres for more than a few weeks or months,' says Mr Kankaras. 'This is why we only ask some general information about the child's early education experience, rather than detailed information on what actually happens in these centres.'

'The focus of this study is on learning outcomes of children at this age and which factors in their environment may be fostering or hindering development of skills. In this sense, the emphasis is more on what happens at a child's home, which is reflected in a substantially lengthier parent questionnaire.'

Professor Urban says, 'Research clearly shows that standardised assessments with very young children are not at all reliable, especially in an international comparative context.'

An evaluation of Unicef's Early Learning and Development Standards programme, a recent attempt to develop an international measurement system, found that governments and national agencies had by and large failed to use the data gathered to inform policy and practice, or achieve improvements in school readiness.

LEAGUE TABLES

Once a standardised assessment has been introduced, with the potential for 'country league tables', practitioners might feel pressured to 'teach to the test'.

'We can see this has happened in this country already,' says Professor Urban. 'The moment you introduce an assessment framework, even if there is resistance in the sector, it will inevitably shape expectations towards children's achievement, and practitioners will want to make sure children do well.'

With the IELTS delivered by the same organisation behind PISA, there is concern that a focus on future outcomes could lead to inappropriate developments in early education and care.

'Providing for children now on the basis of what might be right for them when they are 16 or 17 is a view that is very much about the long-term consequences,' says Dr Barron. 'The concern to provide certain outcomes at age 16 leads to practices at three, four and five that are not appropriate for three-, four- and five-year-olds.'

'Quite often what happens at five is not a good predictor, but what children achieve at that age seems to be a particular preoccupation in this country.'

The OECD says it consulted experts from the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. 'Moreover, some of the leading ECEC academics were contracted to do a literature review of the evidence of the role and importance of early learning and its influence on later life outcomes,' says Mr Kankaras. 'A number of ECEC experts are members of boards that are monitoring the study design and administration, and providing ongoing advice.'

A number of countries, including Germany, Denmark and Sweden, have said they will not be taking part, but while it is still unclear whether the UK will be involved, many think it is likely. 'I am pretty sure the UK Government will be part of this, especially since the car crash they had with the baseline assessment last year,' says Professor Urban. 'This will offer a new opportunity to introduce something similar.'

'Very few people in the sector know about this,' says Dr Barron. 'I would like to see a meaningful discussion with practitioners and higher education about what is important in terms of early childhood. I suspect the Government feels that ideas about what is important have been established already, but we are trying to say that only part of that argument is being heard.'

MORE INFORMATION

Learn about best practice from around the world at our conference 'Play and Learning: a global perspective' on 28 June in central London. The conference will look at what constitutes 'quality' in early childhood education (ECE) and give an insight into highly rated ECE systems, including those in New Zealand and Sweden. Keynote speakers are Professor Carmen Dalli, director of the Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; and Dr David Whitebread, a developmental psychologist, early years specialist and acting director (external relations) of the Play in Education, Learning and Development Research Centre, University of Cambridge. Workshop topics will include the Pikler method in under-threes care, Sweden's outdoor provision and Froebel's approach. Go to www.playandlearning.co.uk [3].

IELS, www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-bein... [4]

Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation: A comment on the OECD initiative to launch an International Early Learning Study (IELS), by Mathias Urban and Beth Blue Swadener. Available at <http://receinternational.org/RECE-comment-on-OECD-ICCPS.html#sthash.mUwP...> [5]

Briefing and Response to Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), International Early Learning Study (IELS), by ECSDN, TACTYC and SEFDEY. Available at <http://tactyc.org.uk/consultations> [6]

'The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's International Early Learning Study: Opening for debate and contestation', by Peter Moss et al, Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, August 2016. Available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1463949116661126> [7]

'The OECD's International Early Learning Study: what happened next', by Peter Moss and Mathias Urban, will appear in Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/cie> [8]

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