

The International Early Learning Study (IELS)

Update, critical questions, next steps

Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network | London | 10 March 2017

Mathias Urban, University of Roehampton
Early Childhood Research Centre



IFS: THE INTERNATIONAL FROEBEL SOCIETY
Promoting Child-Centred Kindergarten & Early Education Worldwide



[Billy McBone](#) by Allan Ahlberg

Billy McBone
Had a mind of his own,
Which he mostly kept under his hat.
The Teachers all thought
That he couldn't be taught,
But Bill didn't seem to mind that.

Billy McBone
Had a mind of his own,
Which the teachers had searched for for years.
Trying test after test,
They still never guessed
It was hidden between his ears.

Billy McBone had a mind of his own,
Which only his friends ever saw.
When the teacher said, 'Bill,
Whereabouts is Brazil?'
He just shuffled and stared at the floor.

Billy McBone
Had a mind of his own,
Which he kept under lock and key.
While the teachers in vain
Tried to burgle his brain,
Bill's thoughts were off wandering free.

Context: OECD as international player in education

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD):

- Established 1948
- “to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world”
- 35 members – rich countries around world including 18 in EU
- Increasing involvement in social area, e.g. Family Data Base...Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), “to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students” ...early childhood

Context: OECD as international player in education

- 1996-2006: *Starting Strong 1 and 2*...review of early childhood policies in 20 countries – landmark comparative study
- 2011: *Starting Strong 3* – ‘quality toolbox for ECEC’
- 2015: *Starting Strong 4* – ‘monitoring quality’
- 2012: network of government reps propose cross-national assessment of learning outcomes...16 countries work with OECD “to scope the study”
- 2017: development and pilot work to start

Current initiative: International Early Learning Study (IELS)

- Common measures to assess young children across participating countries on a number of ‘domains’ that *“represent a balance of both cognitive and social and emotional skills that, as a package, will provide coherent and reliable insights into children’s early learning”* and that are *“malleable in the early years”*
- Exact domains to be finalised, but six provisionally identified *“based on an analysis of early skills that are predictive of positive life outcomes”*: self-regulation; oral language/emergent literacy; mathematics/numeracy; executive function; locus of control; and social skills

Current initiative: International Early Learning Study (IELS)

- Results from assessing these domains will be contextualised with information on: ECEC experiences, home learning environment and children's individual characteristics.
- Assessments will be undertaken of children between 4.5 and 5.5 years
- *"It is likely to involve 15-20 minutes of direct testing for each of the four domains in the study. The default mode of delivery is via tablet"* (Department for Education, 2017)

International Early Learning Study (IELS): supposed purpose

To improve ECEC services:

To help countries improve the performance of their systems, to provide better outcomes for citizens and better value for money. Comparative data can show which systems are performing best, in what domains and for which groups of students. It would also provide insights on how such performance has been achieved. Thus, internationally comparable data would enable countries to compare the relative strengths and areas for development in their own ECEC systems with those in other jurisdictions (OECD, 2016)

International Early Learning Study (IELS): supposed purpose

To improve later school performance:

*In time, the information 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** (OECD, 2016)*

Concerns and counterarguments

Since knowledge of plans for IELS become more widely known, a number of concerns have been expressed and counterarguments put forward in:

- 3 articles in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* (by 9 academics and two groups from New Zealand, including Margaret Carr);
- a statement and article in *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies* by RECE (Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education); signed by 200 supporters from 20 countries
- a number of national articles and statements (Belgium, France, Germany, UK)

Democratic deficit and lack of accountability

Power, secrecy and public unaccountability

- OECD exercises great ‘soft’ power in education...not acknowledged
- IELS surrounded in secrecy and lack of information...very few people in EC community aware of proposal until recently when decisions made
- OECD has not responded to concerns that have been raised...despite offer to submit article for CIEC
- OECD lacks accountability to early childhood community and general public...accountable only to its member states, who OECD says have responsibility to inform and consult – but few seem to have done so

Meaningless data on a global scale?

“Instead of careful, culturally and contextually appropriate consideration of the achievements of early childhood systems in diverse countries, and of systemic evaluation of the actual outcomes for children, families and society, IELS appears to adopt a strategy that favours largely decontextualised comparison and measurement of narrowly defined predetermined outcomes. It is our concern that such an approach will not provide necessary or meaningful information for decision makers and early childhood leaders in participating countries and beyond. What it will do is draw early childhood education firmly into a global framework of standardised assessment across all tiers of the education system, from early childhood to higher education” (Mathias Urban, RECE, 2016)

Yes to cross-national learning, no to IELS

*The creation of a truly educational environment, where learning of real value may take place between countries, requires these and other concerns to be addressed and, probably too, **a different type of comparative study**: more the initial Starting Strong project with its case studies than the IELS with its battery of standardised tests. In the interests of a **democratic politics of education** and of a comparative approach to education that **provokes thought rather than regulates performance**, we hope that early childhood communities around the world will **raise their voices** and that the OECD will **enter into dialogue** with the*
(Peter Moss and 8 others, 2016)

Where are we now (March 2017)?

OECD has moved into a development and piloting stage

- ‘International Contractor’ appointed 9/2016 to design, develop and pilot the study (Australian Council for Educational Research + International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement)
- Timeline: 2017/18 - developing and field testing assessment instruments; late 2018/early 2019 - running the pilot study in; early 2020 - results available...
- Decision about moving to full study

Where are we now (March 2017)?

- OECD envisages 3 to 6 countries participating in the pilot stage of the IELS...but not saying who these will be
- Some countries have said they will not participate – in pilot stage (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Norway)
- Now OECD – on new website – refers to
*“ The International Early Learning **and Child Well-being Study**...an international survey that assesses children at approximately 5 years of age year-old across 3 to 6 countries, identifying key factors that drive or hinder the development of early learning” ...dropped reference to ‘pilot’*



Now OECD – on new website – refers to
“ *The International Early Learning **and Child Well-being Study**...an international survey that assesses children at approximately 5 years of age year-old across 3 to 6 countries, identifying key factors that drive or hinder the development of early learning” ...
dropped reference to ‘pilot’*

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>

Closing windows of opportunity

FIGURE 1 THE BRAIN'S ABILITY TO CHANGE AND THE AMOUNT OF EFFORT REQUIRED FOR SUCH CHANGE



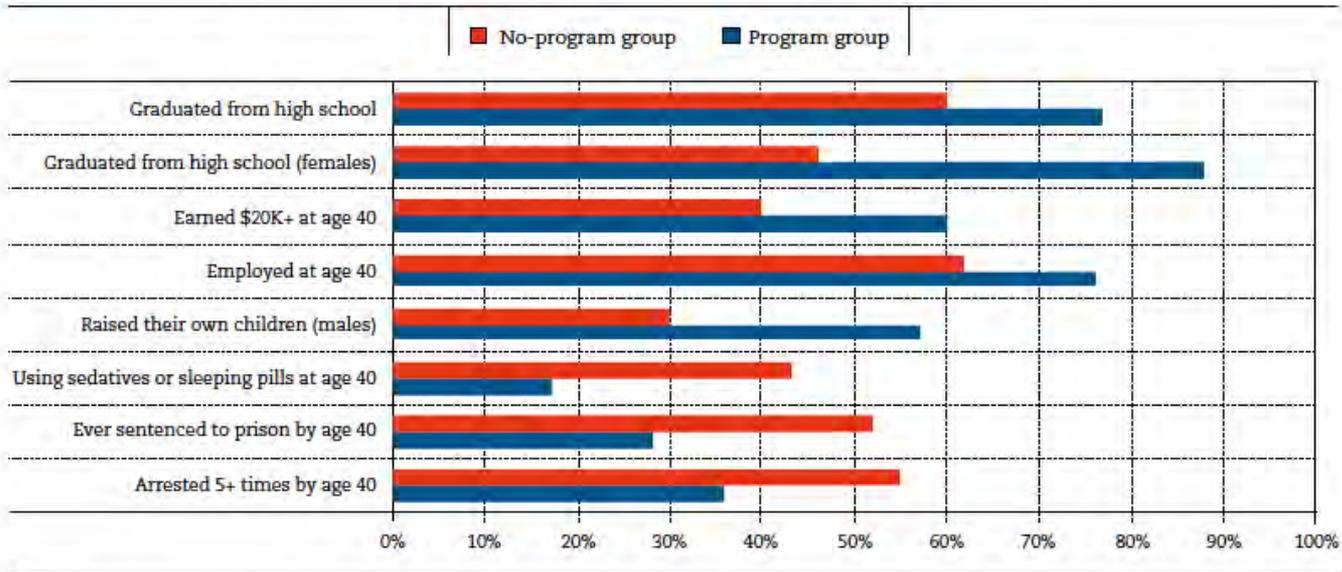
Source: Levitt C.A. (2009), *From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children And Families*, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Importance of 'home learning environment':

Children who experience fewer interactions with their parents (e.g. reading with children, number/letter activities, going to the library, painting and drawing, etc.) from ages 10 to 36 months perform lower on cognitive skills tests (e.g., in mathematics) later in life than children whose parents were more involved with them

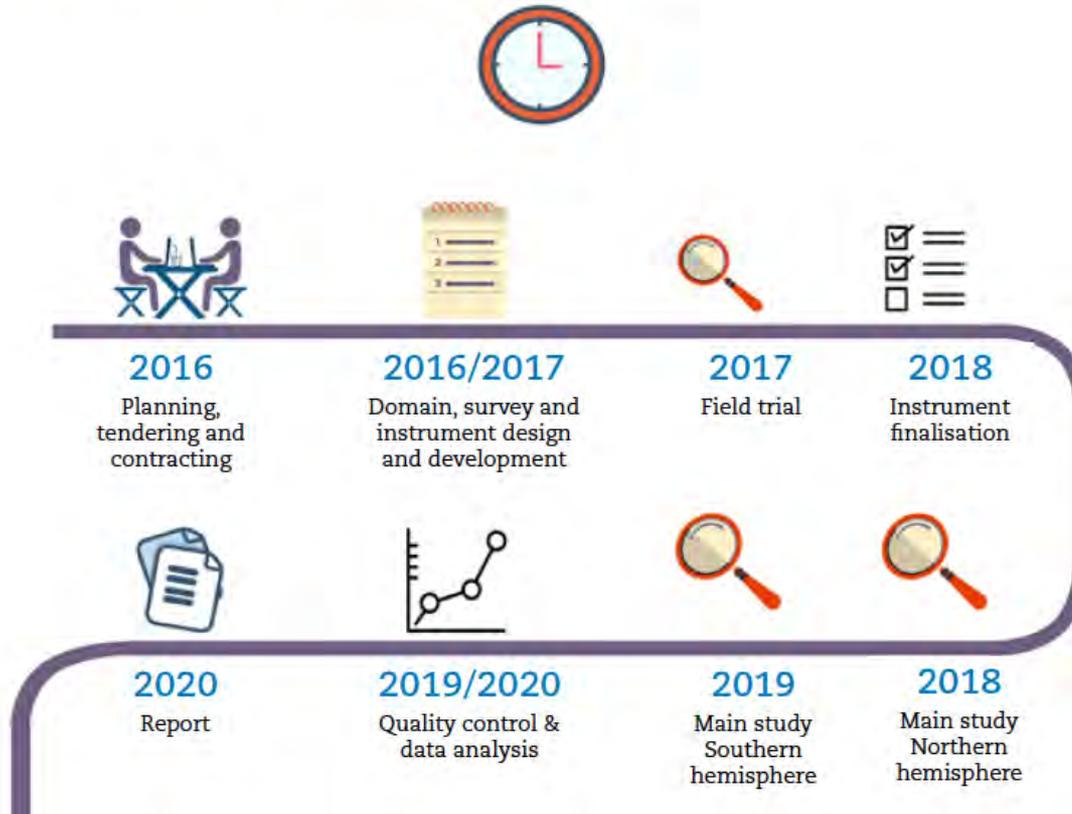
Perry Preschool Project all over again?

FIGURE 9 LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF PARTICIPATION IN THE PERRY PRE-SCHOOL PROGRAMME



Source: Schweinhart, L.J. et. al. (2005), *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40*, HighScope Press, Ypsilanti, MI.

WHEN WILL THE STUDY BE CARRIED OUT?



Pilot? Evaluation? Consultation?

Where are we now in UK (March 2017)?

- “England, Wales (United Kingdom)” participate in the 16 country ‘scoping group’
- 1/2017: Department for Education issues a *“call for expressions of interest to provide a ‘National Centre’ to implement and administer this [pilot] stage of the IELTS in England”*
- *“[T]hree countries – including the UK (represented by England and possibly Wales) – **have agreed to participate in the IELTS pilot study. Scotland and Northern Ireland will not take part”***
- Then DfE says no final decision taken...with Secretary of State... decision will be made soon...will welcome dialogue with field
- BUT very late in day – until now, no information or consultation...did you know?

RECE statement '*Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation*':
[Read and sign up here:](#)

- <http://www.receinternational.org/RECE-comment-on-OECD-ICCPS.html>
- Urban, M., & Swadener, B. B. (2016). Democratic accountability and contextualised systemic evaluation. A comment on the OECD initiative to launch an International Early Learning Study (IELS). *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies*, 5(1), 6-18.

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood articles

- Moss, P. et al (2016). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's International Early Learning Study: Opening for debate and contestation. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 17(3), 343-351
- Carr, M. et al (2016). Some thoughts about the value of an OECD international assessment framework for early childhood services in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 17(4)
- OMEP New Zealand: 17(4)

Thank you!

mathias.urban@roehampton.ac.uk

www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Early-Childhood-Research-Centre/



IFS: THE INTERNATIONAL FROEBEL SOCIETY
Promoting Child-Centred Kindergarten & Early Education Worldwide

