

# OECD's IELTS

## Wasted Opportunity, Democratic Deficit

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## Democratic deficit

### The IELTS

- is a significant and potentially very consequential intervention
- is a cause for concern for a variety of reasons – some to be presented today
- suffers from a serious democratic deficit - discussed and decided by OECD and member state governments without wider participation

## Democratic deficit

2012: first proposed by OECD's ECEC network of government representatives

2015: call for tender (design, development & pilot)

2016: award to consortium led by Australian Council for Educational Research

### first publications voicing concerns

2017: DfE announces participation by England; US & Estonia only other participants...Advisory Committee set up by DfE

2018: Main study starts



## Democratic deficit

Neither OECD nor DfE have attempted to:

- **inform** early childhood community of what was planned – many still do not know about IELS
- **consult** with early childhood community about principle or participation (DfE Advisory Committee **after** decision to participate taken)
- **respond** to published critiques setting out wide range of concerns

Today is the first public event  
in England on IELS



# Some concerns expressed about IELTS

## 1. The political reduced to the technical

- Education is first and foremost a political practice starting with political questions with alternative and often conflicting answers that require political choices: e.g. **What is your image of the child? What is education for? What is knowledge? What are fundamental values? What ethics?**
- OECD neither sets out its political questions nor argues for its choices...nor engages with alternative choices



## 1. The political reduced to the technical

- OECD treats education as first and foremost a technical practice

*‘[OECD adopts a vision of comparative education] as a technical process modelled on industrial benchmarking, in which the outcomes have been determined, and the aim is simply to engage in the global war for talent by learning enough from [our] competitors to beat them at their own game’ (Auld and Morris, 2016)*

**IELS is an example of this**



## 2. No room for diversity

- IELTS is a blunt instrument seeking to reduce the rich diversity and complexity of ECEC to common outcomes using standardised measures
- Background items on child and family – nothing on wider social, cultural, pedagogical context
- IELTS cannot accommodate, let alone welcome, diversity – of paradigm or theory...pedagogy or purpose...concept or image...context or culture

## 2. No room for diversity

- The failure to accommodate diversity undermines the IELS

*‘[IELS findings will be] largely meaningless due to their disconnect with and disrespect for diverse, locally embedded approaches to early childhood education and care’ (Urban and Swadener, 2016)*

## 2. No room for diversity

- Concern expressed in **Germany** about IELTS failure to accommodate diversity

*‘Other indicators for high-quality ECEC are ignored or marginalised by IELTS, including the quality of relationships, children’s rights, diversity and inclusion’* (German National Association of Parent Cooperative Preschools)

*‘A study structured in this manner would be at odds with the educational standards of inclusion and diversity that German practice explicitly adheres to’* (Pestalozzi-Froebel Association)



## 2. No room for diversity

- Concern expressed in **New Zealand** about failure of IELTS to do justice to distinctive socio-cultural approach, including *Te Whāriki* curriculum

*‘To fairly and truly judge what a person can do, you need to know how the talent (skill, knowledge) you are assessing is situated in – placed within – the lived social practices of the person as well as his or her interpretations of those practices...[M]any a standardized test can be perfectly ‘scientific’ and useless at the same time; in a worst case scenario, it can be disastrous’ (Gee, 2007)*



## 2. No room for diversity

- Concern expressed at 2016 RECE Conference about IELTS disregarding the right of Indigenous Peoples to  
*‘the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information’* (UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, arts.15)

## 2. No room for diversity

- IELTS is a product of the 'Anglosphere'... saturated with positivistic and economistic thinking prevalent in the English-speaking world
- 2 of 3 participating countries (England and the US) and the lead international contractor (Australian) are from the Anglosphere
- IELTS is an example of what Loris Malaguzzi called 'Anglo-Saxon testology'

## Anglo-Saxon testology...

*‘which is nothing but a ridiculous simplification of knowledge, and a robbing of meaning from individual histories’* (Malaguzzi, 1988)

### 3. Dangers of soft power, e.g. making the Other into the Same

- OECD exercises enormous ‘soft power’ on national education policies and systems...  
country’s want to improve league table position

*‘[Concern about] a growing standardisation and narrowing of early childhood education, as the IELTS tail increasingly wags the early childhood dog’ (Moss et al., 2016)*

### 3. Dangers of soft power, e.g. making the Other into the Same

*‘[A pedagogy of compliance, as governments] call on the apparent precision of numbers to prescribe and measure context-free and curriculum-free internationally developed and validated outcomes over time...[To the detriment of] New Zealand early childhood sociocultural and bicultural curriculum... [which] has established a set of priorities for teaching and learning that are different from most of the other OECD countries’ (Margaret Carr and others, 2016)*

### 3. Dangers of soft power, e.g. making the Other into the Same

*'[T]he simplest way to improve PISA scores is for nations to align their curricula more closely to what is measured by PISA ... If countries do this and improve their scores, we will enter into a closed and self-fulfilling system in which nations teach according to test requirements and better scores create the illusion of improvement'* (Morris, 2016)

## Making the Other into the Same is a power issue – and an ethical issue

- How can we respect diversity and otherness?
- How can we avoid ‘grasping’ the Other and making them into the Same?

*‘To think another whom I cannot grasp is an important shift and it challenges the whole scene of pedagogy. It poses other questions to us pedagogues. Questions such as **how the encounter with Otherness, with difference, can take place as responsibly as possible**’ (Dahlberg, 2003)*

**OECD and IELTS do not ask such  
ethical questions**



## 4. Naïve view of policy learning

- IELS based on principle of *‘policy relevance – enabling changes in policies and/or practices’*...*‘countries will be able to share best practices’*

### BUT HOW?

- No understanding of culture, policies or practices  
*‘National education systems are embedded in national culture...[so that] no educational policy or practice can be properly understood except by reference to the web of inherited ideas and values, habits and customs, institutions and world views, that make one country distinct from another’* (Alexander, 2012)



## 4. Naïve view of policy learning

- What policy conclusions can you draw from 3 countries – to what question are test scores for England, Estonia and US the answer?
- This is not how policy making works

*‘...wholly unsurprising tendency for policymakers to view such comparative data on pupil performance as an expedient resource...[which] provides a massive source of evidence, from which they can hunt for correlations to legitimize their own ideological preferences’ (Morris, 2016)*

## 5. No acknowledgement or engagement with criticisms of PISA

*‘Vast literature that critiques aspects of [PISA’s] methodology’* (Gorur, 2014)

e.g.

*‘Basic structural problems are inherent in the PISA undertaking and, hence, cannot be fixed...[It] is impossible to construct a test that can be used across countries and cultures to assess the quality of learning in real life situations’* (Sjøberg, 2016)

## 5. No acknowledgement or engagement with criticisms of PISA

*‘Our review of the PISA controversy highlighted a problem of power...[With PISA, the OECD has] used its authority to **dominate the global conversation**, potentially at the expense of national or regional authorities and institutions...[and] effectively **marginalises alternative visions of education** that would normally hold weight. Thus the idea of education as personal development and fulfilment, what Germans call Bildung, becomes invisible, because it cannot be used as an internationally comparable metric (Saltelli, 2017)*



## Wasted opportunity

- We are **NOT AGAINST** comparative study of ECEC...systemic evaluation...learning with and from each other in international contexts

BUT

- We are **AGAINST** standardised measuring of a small number of centrally determined indicators
- We are **AGAINST** an approach that provokes league table comparisons and competition

## Wasted opportunity

- We are **FOR** a nuanced enquiry into culture, understandings, concepts, structures etc... respectful of children's rights, welcoming of diversity and complexity, inclusive of the field's multiple perspectives
- We are **FOR** an approach to comparative study that provokes thought and dialogue
- We are **FOR** engaging a wide range of diverse stakeholders in democratically meaningful and accountable ways

## Wasted opportunity

- OECD has made this sort of enquiry in the past – ‘Starting Strong’ study (1996-2006) led by John Bennett...an original and exemplary comparative study of early childhood policies in 20 countries

*‘ECEC policy and the quality of services are deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff?’ (OECD, 2001, p. 63)*

Instead of building on this important work, OECD has adopted a crude, uninformative and potentially damaging approach

The IELS is a wasted opportunity to further the comparative study of ECEC due in part to a democratic deficit

We should and can do better