

**Response to the colloquium
'The Organisation for Economic
Co-operation and Development's
International Early Learning
Study: Opening for debate and
contestation', by Peter Moss,
Gunilla Dahlberg, Susan Grieshaber,
Susanna Mantovani, Helen May,
Alan Pence, Sylvie Rayna, Beth Blue
Swadener and Michel Vandebroeck,
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UNESCO recommendations from the Gothenburg meeting (2007) recognised that early childhood curricula need to be 'context sensitive and culturally relevant' (Pramling Samuelsson and Kaga, 2008), allowing children, families and communities to work together to explore meaningful local issues. Pedagogies set in a context of democracy, citizenship, humanity, equity, rights, responsibilities and trust in each other are integral components of many highly acclaimed early childhood curricula – for example, *Te Whāriki* (Aotearoa New Zealand) and Reggio Emilia (Italy).

Nel Noddings (2002) has also written about the importance of engaging with a moral curriculum which allows for learning to be focused on the issues and questions that answer the key issues

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that impact on and concern children. She noted that there is no place for universal assessment in education.

Young children are citizens and therefore have the right to have a voice in their families and communities, where it is important for them to participate through expressing their ideas and opinions about the issues that impact on their lives. Early childhood contexts are so integrated with culture that any universal assessment would inevitably set societies apart by advantaging some and disadvantaging others, making the type of assessment planned by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the International Early Learning Study invalid and of serious concern if it is planned to be used as a basis for early childhood education policy at the national level.

The introduction of an international assessment of children's early learning, such as proposed by the OECD with its planned International Early Learning Study, will shift the emphasis away from pedagogies which focus on that which is meaningful and relevant in children's lives and their learning, to an emphasis on achieving assessment results that fit a universal framework. As seen with previous similar assessment initiatives, minority groups score poorly, which disempowers them and so perpetuates the gross injustice that these children are viewed as less capable and less competent citizens in the community (Smith, 2013). In the early years, there should be more emphasis on how children develop their identity as learners by strengthening their dispositions for learning throughout their life. At this very significant stage in children's lives, where the best learning is with and alongside others within a sociocultural framework, individual assessment would be counterproductive and unnecessary. No individual child reaches her/his potential alone: it is always within a community of learners, where participation and exploration are encouraged.

One further cause for concern is the likely competition between public, private and corporate provision, as centres would use results from assessment outcomes to market their business and pressure parents and families. Parents, who always want the best for their child, will enrol their children under the misguided belief that this is, first and foremost, in the best interests of the child. Universal assessment is seen by the OECD as a tool to improve economic outcomes. Economic outcomes, however, will be best realised through communities who understand the potential of learning and working together to nurture and support their children within a social and cultural education context where teachers and children are not subjected to universal testing.

We would like to draw attention to the following 2016 United Nations (UN) Resolution that urges states to regulate education providers and support public education. Forty-seven member states adopted the resolution, confirming states' commitment to support public education and regulate all education providers to realise the right to education without discrimination and with dignity for all. 'The Resolution, which was adopted during the 32nd session of the UN Human Rights Council (13 June to 1 July 2016), urges all states to 'address any negative impacts of the commercialization of education', in particular by putting in place a framework to regulate and monitor education providers' (Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2016).

Other UN human rights bodies have already raised serious concerns regarding the explosive and unregulated growth of private education providers. In his recent report, the Special Rapporteur to the UN warns that:

The State is both guarantor and regulator of education. The provision of basic education, free of cost, is not only a core obligation of States, it is also a moral imperative.

... The Special Rapporteur considers it essential, when looking at privatization in education, to bear in mind State obligations in respect of the right to education: States must ensure[,] promote, respect and fulfil the right to education. (Singh, 2015: 8)

If states are serious about raising the quality of early childhood education, it would be better to invest time and funds in the provision of early childhood education that is informed, sustainable, locally responsive and culturally sensitive, rather than in the development of a universal assessment item. In this way, the right to education without discrimination and with dignity is most likely to be met.

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Glynne Mackey is a senior lecturer in early years education at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand and is a member of OMEP Aotearoa. Her teaching and research focus is on sustainability and social justice issues within early childhood education, with particular focus on children's agency, participation and ecojustice.

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