The data have landed

*First they said they needed data
about the children
to find out what they're learning.
Then they said they needed data
about the children
to make sure they are learning.
Then the children only learnt
what could be turned into data.
Then the children became data.*

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The Shape of Things to Come and what to do about Tom and Mia. Interrogating the OECD's International Early Learning Study from an anti-colonialist perspective

Abstract

In this article, I discuss the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS), which is currently being rolled out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). I summarise the development of IELS and the critique that has been voiced by early childhood scholars, professionals and advocates. I then move to an aspect of IELS that has so far been absent from the discussion: the actual conduct of the test, using the two stylised child characters Tom and Mia. I provide a provisional reading of the Tom and Mia imaginary through the lens of post- and neo-colonial analysis. Applying the concept of colonisation as a frame of reference opens a space for introducing *resistance* and *anti-colonial practices* as productive forces to challenge the global hegemony. I draw on Pedro Sotolongo's concept of the *power of marginal notions* to argue that experiences made on the margins of society, both geographically and socially, offer very practical alternatives to reconceptualising early childhood education, and services for young children, families and communities.

Setting the Scene

A long economic slump in Europe, war and devastation. A global benevolent dictatorship that paves the way for world peace by enforcing the English language, promoting scientific learning and outlawing religion. The result: a race of super-talents, able to maintain a permanent utopia. H.G. Wells' future history novel *The Shape of Things to Come*, published in 1933, was frighteningly accurate in predicting, among other things, the devastation of aerial bombardments in World War II. Fast forward one century, Wells' plot can be read as an eerie frame of reference for current large-scale developments in early childhood development, education and care.

The *International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study* (IELS), initiated by the Organization for Economic Development and Co-operation (OECD) without any meaningful involvement of the field, is only the latest element in a global array of standardised approaches to assessing the education of young children (e.g. the MELQO project (*Measuring Early Learning and Quality Outcomes*) or the various initiatives to introduce 'baseline assessment' in the UK). Standardised assessment in early childhood itself is part of a much wider global surge of standardised testing across all areas of education, from early childhood, to compulsory education, professional practice and higher education (Morris, 2016). Plans by OECD to develop and conduct a large-scale standardised test of young children only came to the attention of a wider international audience in 2015, following the issue of a call for tender for the international coordination of the project (OECD, 2015). Since then, several authors, individually and collectively, have brought forward detailed critical arguments about the general approach, the methodology, and the overall 'superficiality and pointlessness' of the IELS (Moss and Urban, 2018) of IELS (Carr, Mitchell and Rameka, 2016; Moss, Dahlberg et al, 2016; Urban and Swadener, 2016; Knauf, 2017; Pence, 2017; Moss and Urban, 2017, 2018; Urban, 2017, 2018).

In this paper, I build on these arguments, if only as a reminder of an ongoing wider scholarly and political debate about the current global trend towards standardisation in early childhood education, and in education more generally. I take a two-staged approach: first, I summarise, briefly, the published critique of IELS. I then move from the macro-political and conceptual framing of the project to the micro-politics (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) of the actual conduct of the test. I offer a first reading of IELS through a lens that exposes the culture and class bias, and the neo-colonialist undertone of a project that makes no sense unless it is read as a tool to draw early childhood education firmly into the hegemony of neoliberal (re)-colonisation of education on a global scale. I use the concept of hegemony here with reference to Gramsci (1971) who reminds us that an understanding of 'education as a political practice' does not necessarily equate to practices that are always liberating. On the contrary. Every practice, including oppressive practice, he argues, is educational. IELS-style testing carries the risk of shifting education firmly into that space.

If the first part of my argument evokes images of an angry critique rather than a thoroughly crafted analysis of IELS in the wider context of a debate on assessment and evaluation, it is because of the persistent refusal of OECD to engage with any of the detailed arguments that have been brought forward by critical scholars. The second part of my argument is meant to

be an opening. An anti-colonialist critique of the imposition of standardised assessment regimes on diverse and culturally embedded local practices of education clearly deserves consideration beyond the scope of this article. Here, I stay within a theoretical framework of post-colonial analysis of early childhood provided by scholars including Radhika Viruru (2004). However, the resonance of the imagery used by IELS (Tom and Mia) with Frantz Fanon's seminal text *Black skin, white masks* (1967, 2008) is hard to ignore.

In this paper, I argue that despite best intentions of some *individual* proponents of IELS and other standardised assessments of young children, the collective consequence very much resembles Wells' benevolent dictatorship. It imposes a narrow, utilitarian, and largely de-contextualised understanding of educational practices on children, practitioners and communities, and dismisses the diversity of ways of *being, knowing* and *doing* in this world. In other words, it is a neo-colonialist project that calls for a collective de-colonialising response.

The International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS)

At the time of writing (summer 2018) the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS) is well underway – and yet it is more than likely that you will not have heard about this project. Despite initiatives from authors and early childhood advocates from around the world to draw attention to the project, the OECD itself has so far made little attempt to inform, let alone engage with, the wider public or the international early childhood community about the IELS. To summarise the information available on the OECD website (<http://www.oecd.org/education/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>), IELS is an international standardised assessment of children at the age of 5 across four 'early learning domains' (early literacy and numeracy skills, self-regulation, and social and emotional skills). External assessors (who are unfamiliar to children and the settings) will carry out the assessment. The assessment itself consists of tablet-based exercises for the children, centred around two stylised child figures that will 'take approximately 15 minutes'. In addition, data about the children's personal background, their 'home-learning environment' and their experiences in the early childhood education and care setting will be collected from parents and ECEC practitioners through paper and online questionnaires.

Critical arguments have been put forward about the questionable methodology, and more generally, about the overall approach of using large-scale data sets collected from very young children for the purpose of decontextualised, league-table style comparison between countries. In a first article drawing attention to IELS and addressing an international audience of early childhood practitioners and scholars, published in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* in 2016, Peter Moss and co-authors ask 'did you know about this?' (Moss et al., 2016, p. 345) – a question to which the persistent response from practitioners, policy makers, and public is: no. Several other publications have raised critical questions about IELS. In 2016 I published, together with Beth Swadener, a short critique and a proposal for more carefully designed systemic evaluation of early childhood systems instead (Urban and Swadener, 2016). This article, published in *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies* and on the website of the *Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education* network

(www.receinternational.org), attracted nearly 200 signatures in support from scholars and professionals in 20 countries. Alan Pence, following up with an opinion piece in the *Journal of Childhood Studies* in 2017, warns of the dangers of 'Baby-PISA' (Pence, 2017). Articles discussing the implications of IELS for the distinctive socio-cultural approach to early childhood education and care practice in New Zealand point out that the standardised, one-size-fits-all approach taken by OECD 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' (Mackey, Hill, and De Vocht, 2016: 448) while Margaret Carr and co-authors (Carr, Mitchell, and Rameka, 2016: 450), citing Gee (2007), caution against the potential damage caused by the exercise:

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. ... many a standardized test can be perfectly 'scientific' and useless at the same time; in a worst case scenario, it can be disastrous.

(Gee, 2007: 364)

Peter Moss and I published two short colloquia in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* providing updates on the IELS and further critical comments (Moss and Urban, 2017, 2018). We argue that IELS is located in a '*global web of measurement* centred on OECD, whose aim appears to be the reduction of education to a purely technical exercise of producing common outcomes measured by common indicators, with the OECD acting as the global arbiter, assessor and governor of education.' In both pieces and other publications, we call on OECD and its partners to start engaging with legitimate concerns and criticisms (Urban, 2017, 2018 in print), including:

- The apparent disregard for a substantial body of evidence that consistently shows the low reliability and validity of standardised tests of young children, especially in contexts of large-scale comparison (Madaus and Clarke, 2001; Meisels, 2004, 2006; Meisels and Atkins-Burnett, 2006). Given these caveats, it has been argued that the findings from IELS 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: 7,8)
- A disregard for diversity, children's rights, and the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and 'education in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning' (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 14)
- A highly selective use of scholarship and research evidence, and the persistent refusal to acknowledge OECD's own paradigmatic position in the light of diverse paradigmatic possibilities: critical (e.g. postcolonial, critical, feminist, Indigenous, trans-disciplinary) scholarship 'is rendered invisible by OECD, its existence not even acknowledged' (Moss and Urban, 2017)
- A naïve underlying belief in the possibility of policy learning and implementation (Urban, 2017), based on an 'implied model of enlightened policymakers objectively and rationally applying lessons from other countries' (Moss et al, 2016).

Arguments for all of the points above draw on an international debate that extends beyond the IELS's assessment of early childhood education to examine the danger of a global testing regime that spans all areas of education, from early childhood through to higher education (Morris, 2016), and to which the OECD have so far declined to respond. There have been few opportunities to discuss IELS in public¹, and at each of them the OECD representatives chose to limit their contributions to technical information available on the website, and declined to engage in critical discussion.

Beyond IELS: A Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)

Critical discussion about IELS has so far focused on specific aspects of the project, i.e. the shroud of secrecy under which it is developed and rolled out, the lack of democratic accountability of the organising body OECD and its contractors, the highly selective use of scholarship and research evidence and the disregard of any critical evidence, the questionable methodology and research ethics (as this is research involving young children as participants). Each one of these aspects deserves critical interrogation and adds to the impression that IELS in its current state is both an irresponsible waste of resources and a missed opportunity to develop and carry out a much-needed meaningful, contextualised, systemic evaluation of early childhood policies and practices (Urban and Swadener, 2016). The IELS imposes a narrow, utilitarian, and largely decontextualised understanding of educational practices on children, practitioners and communities, and dismisses the rich diversity of ways of *being*, *knowing* and *doing* in this world. Critical questions arise, too, about the proactive role OECD has chosen to play in involving private-for-profit companies in the development and conduct of its international assessments (Unwin and Yandell, 2016a; Urban and Swadener, 2016). *Cui bono?* The question who exactly has an interest in and benefits from an exercise like IELS continues to be evaded by its proponents.

However, as Paul Morris (2016) points out, IELS does not exist in a vacuum. It is part of that 'global web of measurement' already referred to, spun from a much wider array of standardised assessments across all sectors of education. These testing regimes, alongside standardisation, privatisation, and de-professionalisation (Arndt et al., 2018) are a defining feature of the *Global Education Reform Movement* (GERM) (Klees, Smoff, and Stromquist, 2012; Sahlberg, 2016), based on the fundamental neoliberal assumption that privatisation, commodification, deregulation and competition will lead to 'better' performance in education:

¹ The first public debate about IELS took place in June 2017 at the European Parliament in Brussels. The event was hosted by the Alliance for Childhood, an international children's rights lobby group. Rowena Phair, the IELS project leader for OECD, presented the study; the Author presented the critical arguments raised by international early childhood scholars and professionals. The first discussion only came about as a reaction to pressure from the international early childhood community. A second public debate took place in London, UK, in February 2018. Similar to the first event in Brussels, the presentation and discussion in England had to be organised by a professional association (the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network) as neither OECD nor the English Department of Education had any intention to present the study to the public or engage in critical discussion. At this event, Peter Moss presented our arguments. The third, and so far, last public discussion took place in New York in April 2018; again, organised by a group of early childhood scholars and hosted by Hunter College, City University of New York. Panel members were Karen Tourangeau (IELS project director for the US contractor Westat), Beth Blue Swadener (Arizona State University), Denisha Jones (Defending the Early Years) and Mathias Urban (Dublin City University). It has to be noted that six years after its inception (2012) the OECD itself has made no attempt whatsoever to present or discuss IELS in public.

GERM is not a formal policy program, but rather an unofficial educational agenda that relies on a certain set of assumptions that are used as education reform principles to improve quality and overall performance in education [...] GERM has become accepted as “a new educational orthodoxy” among international development agencies, consulting firms and private philanthropists. As a consequence, it has shaped many recent education reforms throughout the world, including those in the United States, Australia, England, many parts of Latin America, some Scandinavian countries, and an increasing number of countries in the developing world. (Sahlberg and Hargreaves, 2011)

This global ‘reform’ movement is driven by ideology rather than evidence or necessity. It is a powerful way of promoting one particular narrative of what – and whom – education is for, what counts as success, and how practices and successes should be legitimised, demonstrated and accounted for. Central to this narrative is the term *investment*, suggesting the transfer and accumulation of *capital* and, eventually, a *return on investment*. In this narrative, ‘education’ is reduced to a commodity to increase an individual’s *human capital* and usefulness (often framed as *employability*) in a narrowly defined neoliberal economy. In this story, the fullness of being in the world as a human – *Homo Sapiens*, *Homo Ludens*... – is transformed (reduced!) to humanness in relation to economic activity only – *Homo Economicus*. This, as I have argued elsewhere (Urban, 2015) requires assimilation of diverse *ways of being, knowing and doing* into a uniform mainstream. Tan (2014) in his detailed critique of Human Capital Theory refers to the work of Martha Nussbaum (2010) and Stephen Ball (2010, 2012) as he succinctly sums up the commodification of education on a global scale:

Education is no longer conceived as an integrated strategy to promote freedom, self-enrichment, and human development, but rather it is a business activity driven by profit or a commodity in the market.

(Tan, 2014: 429)

The local, the global, and the (neo-)colonial

Globalisation, in an early definition by Anthony Giddens (1990), is ‘the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’ (p. 64). Early childhood education and care, despite being an inevitably *local* practice (it always takes place somewhere) is deeply influenced by globalisation. Practices and concepts that were developed as responses to a specific social (and often political) reality in a specific geographical and historical context have morphed into global brands: Montessori, Reggio, HighScope, to give just a few examples. In the process, they have become decontextualised, commodified, and stripped of their original cultural relevance and meaning. That the three most prominent examples for globalised early childhood education originate in Europe and the US is no coincidence. The global flow of concepts and practices is neither neutral nor balanced as Ailie Cleghorn and Larry Prochner (Cleghorn and Prochner, 2010), drawing on Bame Nsamenang’s work (Nsamenang, 2007), examine in their book *Shades of Globalization in Three Early Childhood Settings*:

Globalization has the potential to influence teachers and how they work with young children in many ways. For example, western-generated theories about child development often form the basis of teacher training courses, the assumption being that these theories are universally applicable.

(p. 5)

Like in other areas, globalisation in early childhood has become a powerful force for the spread of a supposedly universalised, western (minority world) set of values (e.g. capitalism, free enterprise, competition, individualism) resulting in an all-encompassing economic, social, cultural, and political hegemony (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). These processes were framed back in the early 1990s by the sociologist George Ritzer as *MacDonaldization* or *Disneyfication* early on (Ritzer, 1993) – that his book is in its ninth edition (Ritzer, 2019) at the time of writing shows that the image has lost nothing of its attraction. However, as critical authors have pointed out, such universalising processes are not simply about levelling differences into the same; they have resulted in a global project of *neo-colonisation* (Apple, 2003).

In education, at macro-political level, the agents of globalisation and neo-colonisation include influential international organisations, e.g. the World Bank and its global education strategy (Klees et al., 2012; World Bank, 2011), for-profit corporations, most prominently Pearson PLC (Davis, 2017; Riep, 2015; Unwin and Yandell, 2016a), and increasingly philanthro-capitalist initiatives (Klees, 2016; Unwin and Yandell, 2016b). The OECD and its global project to standardise the testing of young children clearly belong into this framework (Morris, 2016).

Agents of (neo-)colonisation? Meet Tom and Mia

Surprisingly, one of the central aspects of IELS has received little attention so far: the actual conduct of the assessment, with young children in early childhood settings in the participating countries. There is some limited information on the website about the overall approach (assessment in four domains, ‘tablet-based’ etc.), but nothing specific about the instruments that have been developed and tested, and are now being used in the ‘Main Study’ by all three participating countries. However, at the few occasions where OECD/IELS representatives agreed to present the project to the public (Brussels, New York), at least some information has become available: children will be asked to engage in game-like activities centred around two characters, Tom and Mia.

Figure 1: Tom and Mia, hand-out shared with participants at panel discussion, New York 16 April 2018

The picture in figure 1 above is taken from a hand-out that was shared with the participants of a panel discussion at Hunter College, City University of New York on 16 April 2018. The purpose of the event was to inform an interested audience of mostly New York-based early childhood practitioners and scholars about IELS in general, and more specifically about the participation of the United States in the project. As neither the OECD nor the US Department of Education had made any attempts to inform the public about the project, a group of scholars felt the need to take the initiative and invite proponents and critics of IELS and standardised testing to discuss the issues in public.

In 2017, the US Department of Education awarded a contract worth US\$7 million to Westat (according to its website an ‘employee-owned professional services corporation’ that ‘offers innovative professional services to help clients improve outcomes in health, education, social policy, and transportation’) to become the ‘national centre’ for conducting IELS in the US. Like the contractor for the IELS ‘national centre’ in England (NFER), Westat has been heavily involved in PISA and other standardised testing initiatives. Karen Tourangeau, Westat’s project director, presented the US involvement in the study to the audience at the Hunter College meeting. The picture of Tom and Mia is on page three of a four-page (two sheet A4) hand-out. Page one, the front page, contains only the letters IELS in large font and bright colours. Page two lists the names of members of several ‘expert’ and ‘advisory’ groups for IELS at international and US level. There are 22 entries on the list, nine of which are occupied by representatives of the three organisations that form the consortium for the international development and coordination of IELS². The list fills roughly the top third of the page; the rest of page two is empty. Page three shows a picture of a tablet computer that displays a full-screen image of the two IELS protagonists, Tom and Mia. The picture fills the top half of the page, the bottom half is empty. Page four (the back page) is completely blank.

² The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) led the management of PISA in 2006 and 2009. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) has a long history of providing international comparative assessments in education, including the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). cApStAn has been involved in PISA since 1998. See Moss and Urban (2017: 251) for more information about the consortium and its members.

Considering the dearth of information on the document, the picture of Tom and Mia has to be considered the main message the hand-out conveys to the audience.

Tom and Mia stand side by side, facing, and smiling at, the assumed user of the tablet. Mia, on the left, is wearing long blue trousers, a red turtleneck sweater and black shoes. Her long brown hair reaches down below her shoulders, held in place by a small hairgrip that sits above the right-hand side of her forehead. Tom, on the right, is wearing long purple trousers, a plum-coloured, long-sleeved jacket, fastened tight with three buttons, over a buttoned-up blue shirt, and brown shoes. Tom is taller than Mia. They stand on a path that appears to lead out of the frame and towards the viewer. The path itself crosses a light green lawn that extends across the scene from darker green background vegetation, perhaps a line of shrubs or trees in the distance, under a light blue sky. Other elements in the picture are a butterfly – yellow wings with purple dots – that hovers to the left of Mia's head, white flowers in a pot, on the path to the left of Mia, another potted plant (green leaves, no flowers) to the right of Tom, and a little blue bird sitting on that plant, its beak wide open, apparently chirping at the children. Apart from some 'motion lines' next to the butterfly's wings there is neither movement nor activity in the picture. Both characters' heads are disproportionately big in relation to their bodies. Their hands, in contrast, are so small they are barely detectable. There is no obvious indication of either child's ethnicity but Mia's skin is white, Tom's is of a light brown colour.

The image exudes an untroubled lightness that appears intended to reassure the viewer that what follows will be fun, easy, and certainly not harmful in any way. How could Tom and Mia possibly be an example of children constructed as the 'perfect objects of Empire' (Cannella and Viruru, 2004: 97) and a global network of (neo-)colonisation?

We can start with a statement of the obvious: Tom and Mia, the two characters designed to lead children in all participating countries through the IELTS assessment are not real children. They are representations, and as such, we can ask *what* and *who* they represent. Representation itself is a complex concept and a double-edged sword. In colonial and neo-colonial contexts, representation has been, and continues to be, employed as a powerful 'methodology of contemporary colonization' (Cannella and Viruru, 2004):

Although political representation may be seen from the dominant perspective as an act of speaking, from other points it may actually be seen and experienced as silencing (p. 69).

If Tom and Mia are *representing* IELTS and its methodology (my conclusion, based on the absence of other meaningful information on the hand-out or indeed the OECD/IELTS website), they may well be seen by their designers and the experts behind the study as enabling children and their experiences to 'speak' to decision makers through the 'robust empirical data on children's early learning' they will help to collect (<http://www.oecd.org/education/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>). The question arises, however, to what extent children and their communities (as well as early childhood practitioners) will be silenced in the process.

The target group of IELS and its 'tablet-based' tests are five-year old children. Tom and Mia, as their physiognomy, appearance and composed demeanour show, are no five year-olds. They appear older, seven or eight at least, and perhaps in their early teens; this seems strange in the context of an activity that is supposed to be carried out by five year olds. There are other layers of *representation-as-silencing* in this image. Standing motionless in a park-like landscape or garden, their outfits clearly not suitable for anything to do with rough-and-tumble or messy play, painting, experimenting, cooking, gardening, digging, or indeed anything involving physical or hands-on activity, Tom and Mia give a strong indication of what counts as 'early learning' in the context of IELS. They seem to represent the 'domains' to be tested in the assessment more than the actual children that will be exposed to the tests. One can imagine them engaging with 'early numeracy' and 'early literacy' exercises, competently exerting 'self-regulation' and displaying 'empathy' to others and 'trust' to the unfamiliar 'trained study administrator' who appears in their classroom, tablet in hand. The iconography – huge heads, negligible hands, motionless bodies – suggests a radical turn away from Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's union of 'head, heart and hands' as the necessary foundation of learning and pedagogy. What is taking place here is nothing short of a radical re-definition, by the proponents of IELS, of what it means to be a child and, in consequence, a human being.

The ubiquity of such acts of re-defining and thus controlling and 'othering' younger human beings as children inspired Radhika Viruru and Gaile Cannella to investigate them through the lens of colonisation, and its 'post-' and 'neo-' incarnations. They write:

What kinds of limitations and lost possibilities take place when this labelling occurs? [...] the status of the child is used to signify and legitimate the behaviour of particular human beings. Further, the label and all that is associated with it limits one's expectations of what those who have been labelled can do.

[...]

What is controlled, lost, disqualified, and even erased through our expectations? How do our beliefs about children serve as violence against children, a kind of epistemic violence that limits human possibilities, freedom and actions? (Cannella and Viruru, 2004: 2)

There are many layers of colonialism, (mis-)representation, othering, silencing, stereotyping and marginalisation that can be peeled off the image of Tom and Mia. The most obvious being gender, age, class, ability and ethnicity; all coming together in a picture of general disregard for diversity that seems to underpin the IELS.

This lack of diversity is of particular concern. The IELS and its methodology have been designed to be universally applicable, in any participating country, regardless of context, but the approach taken by the IELS suggests that its proponents either underestimate or (worse) knowingly disregard the complexity of local practices in early childhood, and the diverse historical and cultural contexts they are rooted in. This, as we have discussed in an earlier publication (Urban and Swadener, 2016), amounts to a deliberate denial of the rights of children, families and communities to self-determination and meaningful participation in all matters concerning the upbringing of young children. As exemplified by Tom and Mia, a uniform western, normalised, domesticised and sanitised image of the child dominates the approach. This image, through the vehicle of the assessment, is imposed on the complex, diverse and unequal realities of the children. Rights of minorities and indigenous groups are of no consideration for IELS, in direct contradiction, for example, to the United Nations Decla-

ration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIPS) (United Nations, 2007), which explicitly recognises the right of Indigenous Peoples to diversity and to education ‘in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning’ (Article 14), and to ‘dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information’ (Article 15). Despite these rights, the present OECD initiative intersects and overshadows countries’ own approaches to conceptualising, framing and evaluating early childhood education and care practices

Read through a neo-colonial lens, the IELTS (as do other standardised testing regimes) becomes a powerful tool for constructing and maintaining what Cannella and Viruru, referencing Antonio Gramsci, call the ‘neo-colonial situation’: ‘a condition in which control is maintained by a particular cultural, ideological, and economic elite who are complicit with the international capitalist system’ (p. 17). The global (macro-political context) and the local, the upbringing of young children in diverse and specific environments, are inextricably bound up in a hegemonic and, in effect, colonialising exercise. As Antonio Gramsci (1971) reminds us,

Every relationship of “hegemony” is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and international civilisations (p. 666).

Resistance: the power of marginal notions

Historically, colonialism, and its technologies of hegemony and for exerting power have been to the means for building and maintaining Empire in its various forms. Whether geographically or conceptually, Empire is about the assumed (and enforced) supremacy of the centre over the periphery, the province. This continues to be the case under neo-colonial conditions (Apple, 2003), where physical colonisation has been replaced by political, economic and cultural dominance. However, as Rosi Braidotti observes in *Nomadic Theory*, in contemporary contexts the boundaries between centre and periphery have become blurred, resulting in

the clash between the urgency of finding new and alternative modes of political and ethical agency, on the one hand, and the inertia or self-interest of neoconservative thought on the other (Braidotti, 2011: 301).

She urges us to

to explore and experiment with more adequate forms of nonunitary, nomadic, and yet accountable modes of envisaging both subjectivity and democratic, ethical interaction.

(ibid)

Cuban philosopher Pedro Sotolongo (2013) argues along similar lines when he draws the connections between coloniser and colonised, Empire and province. His argument is that it is precisely the inability of the centre of Empire to take notice of and understand the often hidden discourses at the periphery that eventually undermine its foundations. His term for these peripheral but powerful agents is ‘idea-forces’. He writes:

As history demonstrates, these idea-forces are commonly not fostered intentionally by the prevailing social strata of a particular epoch but, on the contrary, emerge due to that epoch's shortcomings. They are a product of the lack of understanding of social realities, the fact that social problems are either ignored or not solved, and the inherent contradictions of the prevailing social strata, which more often than not, benefits from the status quo. It is from a fresh understanding of such social realities and from the efforts of solving those social problems that the new idea-forces arise. And for the same reasons, more often than not, these "idea-forces" make their original impact in the least expected territories and/or social strata of the prevailing society.

(Sotolongo, 2013, pp 99-100)

'Idea-forces' are seeds for transition, he continues, that despite their origins in the margins have the power to disrupt and eventually re-orient the mainstream discourse:

The trans character of the idea-force stems precisely from the peripheral situation of a region or from the marginalized situation of a people; from their previous history, often a formally colonized region and its marginalized people and/or an informally subdued or neo-colonized one, with its very specific sociality, culture, and traditions, all of which constitute that region's or people's social, cultural, and historical legacy.

The trans character emerges from these circumstances and serves as the driving force of idea-forces. In other words, the "trans" character and the "force" of such "idea-forces" both come from the claim of such regions or peoples to re-insert themselves in history—past, current and future history—with their own cultural and social specificity; from their claim not to be considered as totally "subsumed" or "integrated," under the impact of the reigning culture and social order.

(p. 101)

One of the examples he provides is the (re)emergence of the ancient concept of *El Vivir Bien* (Living Well) in 21st century Latin America, in the Andean regions of Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. This concept provides an alternative, in effect a stark contrast, to the western and colonial imposed concepts of capitalist efficiency based on the exploitation of self, fellow humans, and the planet. In its political manifestation, the concept itself is grounded in resistance, and re(claims) the legacy legitimacy of historic Andean rebel leader Tupac Katari.

What are the implications, if any, for the current context of early childhood education faced by the Empire-building undertakings of international agents like the OECD, the World Bank and others? If we can learn anything from the experiences in the past and present, and from the struggle against the imperialist dominance of one supposedly universal way of understanding, practicing, and evaluating early childhood education and care, it is this: that conversations and activities that are taking place outside the western-dominated mainstream 'best practices', 'domains of early learning', and decontextualised assessment of individual performance can offer pathways towards transformation. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write in the introduction to *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education*, (Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, and Yang, 2019), we can draw on 'collective process[es]' that utilize a Freireian dialogical learning approach that is *critical* of the underlying structures of oppression, sys-

tematic in its inquiry [...], *participatory* in involving communities members and organizations in change-making, and *creative* in employing [...] people's cultural productions' (p. xv).

Here lies the possibility – and responsibility – for new conversations between the global and the local, and between the global South and the global North. Together we can change the *Shape of Things to Come*.

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