Abstract：There is a global agreement on the benefits of early childhood education, including poverty alleviation, and a growing consensus around mobilising resources for early childhood services based on needs established on data. However, the way ‘data’ and ‘evidence’ are constructed and the kind of data practices that are used warrants closer attention. This article explores how policy texts based on and with the use of certain data practices establish ‘truths’ about childhoods and society, construct families and communities, and determine forms of provision to address inequality. The article demonstrates how discourses and data practices prioritise ‘the government of poverty’ instead of helping to eliminate it and silence the voices of those living with poverty. This article seeks to re-open a debate that the NIECDP successfully silenced, specifically who benefits, who speaks and who is silenced.

Introduction：It mentions that in 1994, the African National Congress recognized early childhood development as a strategy to counteract apartheid-era inequalities. Despite this, South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries. The introduction states the aim of the article: to explore how policy texts and data practices construct truths about childhood and society, and how they address inequality.

Materials & Methods：With a critical discourse analysis of policy texts and the introduction of alternatives, the analysis seeks to highlight the power and knowledge hierarchies that construct the policies of NIECDP.

Results：This article demonstrates how discourses and data practices prioritise ‘the government of poverty’ instead of helping to eliminate it and silence the voices of those living with poverty. This form of government through data also undermines the policy’s potential to respond to the different life chances resulting from the diverse conditions in which young children live in South Africa.

Discussion：The discussion section critically examines the data practices promoted in the NIECDP, arguing that dominant global discourses on measurement undermine the policy's intention to address poverty and inequality. It delves into the underlying policy discourses and power relations, the 'scientisation' of education governance, and the colonial history influencing policy. The authors also discuss the implications of constructing parents and experts in a binary, the government's approach to addressing poverty, and the potential for resistance and change. The discussion concludes by emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and diverse approach to data practices and policy-making that engages with communities and considers local contexts and knowledge.