

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

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Introduction

The new legislation in the field of education of children with special needs was adopted in 2000. According to the new legislation, inclusion is the basic principle of education of children with special needs. Different programmes have been developed together with compensation programmes for pupils to help them achieve standards of knowledge. All children living in Nigeria have the right to compulsory basic education under equal and non-discriminatory conditions. Compulsory basic education lasts for 9 years and begins when the child reaches the age of 6 and ends when he/she successfully completes the upper basic education programme or after 9 years of schooling. The objectives of basic education are to ensure the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills, as well as ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning (Anayo, 2021). The basic education curriculum is designed to encourage pupils and teachers to achieve internationally comparable educational standards. It provides all school-age children with basic knowledge and skills for the continuation of education and motivates them for lifelong learning. Basic education adapts the learning environment to the needs of children with special needs children.

A special needs child is a youth who has been determined to require special attention and specific necessities that other children do not. A child has special educational needs if the child has a learning problem that makes it more difficult for him/her to learn than most children in their age. Children with special needs may have problems with schoolwork, communication or behaviour. The issues of children with special needs in any community or society call for special attention. Special education, no doubt, provides the best platform to attend to the needs of these persons. The National Policy on Education (2013) defines special education as additional services over and above the regular school programme that are

provided for disabled, disadvantaged and gifted children. The goal of special education is to equalize for its clients available opportunities in the society. It operates on the philosophy of 'catch them young', that is why it starts as soon as a child+ is detected to have special needs and it pursues this mandate through the early intervention programme (Ozaji, 2005).

Assessment can yield a basis for planning the next steps in response to children with needs, if it is done in the right ways. The assessment of children with special needs is a dilemma in the everyday school's life either from the teachers' point of view to the children and their parents' too. Teachers should use assessment as part of teaching and learning to raise pupils' achievement. In the case of children with special needs, they are increasingly exposed to a variety of assessments, whether of their abilities, functioning, learning, attitudes, behaviour or adjustment.

Based on the above, the thesis statement of this chapter focuses its compass on the assessment of children with special educational needs in an inclusive classroom under the following subheadings;

- Assessment of children with special needs
- Assessment strategies for children with special needs
- Challenges of assessing children with special needs in the inclusive classroom
- Suggestions and conclusion

Assessment of Children with Special Needs

The process of education is not complete without the component of assessment. Assessment has played a pivot role in the development of policies and practice in special education. According to Ani, (2009) assessment is meant to diagnose areas where the learners are having difficulty to allow for concentration of efforts in those areas. Assessment is a powerful educational tool for promoting effective learning. The traditional role of assessment for the purposes of grading and reporting should be reconceptualized to promote learning. Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning. It is the process of measuring behaviour and using the results obtained in taking relevant decision about students, curriculum and instruction as well as educational policy (Ugodulunwa, 2011). The assessment that is directed toward diagnosis is often understood as formative assessment that emphasizes the process. It can occur before or during the learning process and has two important goals: directing the teacher in planning the teaching process and helping the pupil in identifying the main study areas that has to be improved (Woolfolk 2002). Getting the right feedback is very important, it is a starting point as well as appropriate direction that shows teachers where to go and how to reach the goal. It enables the learner to increase the effort's level or changes the strategy. The best feedback is the positive one. Knowing what we have already achieved is better than knowing what we did not accomplish. The feedback that enhances the improvement increases the self-esteem and the analytical thinking (Woolfolk 2002). Teachers have to know how to give a positive feedback but it should not deceive the real perception of a problem and hide it. The feeling of failure can have positive

and negative effects on the level of achievement. It depends on the situation and the individual's personality.

Assessment of children's learning is defined as process by which teachers ascertain through data collection if students have learned the skills, content, and habits of mind that will make them successful; if students are not learning, we decide on changes in the curriculum or teaching strategy to improve learning (Dwyer, 2008). According to Koretz, (2003) teachers should maintain the following sets of issues in assessing children in the inclusive classrooms: issues of identification and classification; questions about the appropriate use of accommodations; the problem of special needs that are related to measured constructs; and issues pertaining to test design. Checking and assessing children with special needs achievements are almost indivisible from one another. Children with special needs are in a constant feeling of failure, especially when the impairments are not detected in time. Children have to be helped but also taught how to help themselves.

Emphasis on assessment of children with special needs lies in the service of prevention, of teaching and integration (Anayo, 2019). It is not enough to understand children's individual strengths and weaknesses. The primary objective of assessment is to guide intervention, and for that purpose it must have a broader focus and not concentrate exclusively on the target individuals who appear to have special needs. Assessment outcomes should specify the child's repertoire in important areas of development as well as collect information on the child's social and physical environment (Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001). The proper concern of assessment is redefined in relation to teaching and learning processes. Much less attention is given to learning outcomes: what children have achieved by the end of a period of teaching (Webster, 1992).

Assessment of children with special needs are of utmost importance because these psychological factors have great impact on their learning. For example, a child who could not stay focus or who is daydreaming would not be able to benefit from instruction. These inadequacies need to be identified so that effective assessment strategies could be adopted in teaching and learning. A holistic assessment of children with special needs should look into the social-emotional and behavioral factors besides cognitive domain of the children. Teachers should be aware of why they are measuring a child's performance before choosing an assessment method/strategy. In this regards, the followings are effective way teachers can employ to assess children with special educational needs in the inclusive classrooms:

- a. **Diagnostic testing and assessment:** A diagnostic check is done at the beginning of the school year. It is a check and assessment of the quality of knowledge from the previous education which is considered to be the necessary basis on which new knowledge from a certain field will be upgraded. This also includes entrance exams and qualifying exams. Diagnostic testing is not related

only to the beginning of the school year. It is also performed during the year, before the implementation of each new stage of learning.

- b. **Formal checking and evaluation:** Formal ongoing testing and assessment in the true sense of the word should be understood as a continuous process of monitoring and checking (controlling) the performance of students' achievements in teaching, in order to collect data for evaluating them. Formal assessment and verification must be carried out continuously so that it can also intervene over the course of the event process. Formal checking starts from the individual attributes (subjective and objective) of each student, and therefore teaching must be adapted to those possibilities. Formal checking does not end with an assessment, especially with an official summative assessment and assignment of the numerical value.
- c. **Summative checking and evaluation:** It is carried out at the end of certain stages or periods of the teaching process, such as so-called classification periods, such as semester or end of the school year. The purpose of this checking and assessment is to fully understand the results of the students, i.e. summarizing the achievements and assessing their quality.
- d. **Internal testing and assessment:** Checking and assessment performed by teachers themselves who teach at school is called internal checking and assessment. It is a regular and dominant practice present in schools. It has the character of formative assessment that is continuous and performed as an integral part of the teaching process.
- e. **External checking and evaluation:** It is a check and assessment performed by outsiders (experts, supervisors, inspectors). As a rule, it is performed at the end of the school year and has the character of final summative checking and assessment. However, it can be performed at any time of the school year depending on the purpose of the checking. (Popovski, 2005).
- f. **Benchmark and interim assessments:** The benchmark and interim assessment can also be very helpful to teachers as program evaluation tools and as a means to identify students who need special help (Shepard, 2005).
- g. **Portfolio Assessment:** The portfolio is a record of the child's process of learning, what the child has learned and how he has gone about learning; how he thinks, questions, analyzes, synthesizes, produces, and creates; and how he interacts – intellectually, emotionally and socially with others (Grace & Cathy, 1992). According to Arter and Spandel (1991), portfolio is a powerful collection of a child's work that can be used to document the child's efforts, progress, and achievements over time. Portfolios often demonstrate to parents child skills of which they were unaware and teach parents how to interpret their children's work (Meisels, 1993; Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Portfolios are open-ended and flexible. The content of the portfolio depends on educational goals and purposes and can include a variety of children's work as well as teacher and parent observations. Ideally, a portfolio includes observations in all of the following forms:

- 1) Anecdotal records – factual, non-judgemental notes of children’s activity
 - 2) Checklist inventory – based on regular activities
 - 3) Rcales – appropriately used when the behaviour to be observed has several aspects or components
 - 4) Questions and requests – to ask direct, open-ended questions of individual children
 - 5) Screening tests – used to help identify the skills and strengths that children already possess so that meaningful learning experience can be planned
- h. **Curriculum Assessment:**Curriculum assessment is a process of gathering and analyzing information from multiple sources in order to improve student learning in sustainable ways.The achievement of a well-designed curriculum in special education depends on the ability of the school administrator to ensure appropriate educational opportunities for students with special needs. This involves adequate planning of the curriculum that focuses on activity-based learning, self-directed learning, and cooperative group work and peer learning.

Assessment is the most important tool when it comes to students with special needs. The importance of assessing students with special needs in inclusive conditions is the goal of the assessment to help the teacher collect information and facilitate the decision-making process; to allow each child to show what he/she knows. Children with special needs can engage in standardized tests offered to all learners, may use different accommodation conditions, or use different estimates that measure their success. Hence, assessment determines the adequacy of programs and services, measures the achieved success and focuses on the new teaching directions. Some teachers are concerned about grading and the fairness of using different criteria to assess different learners. They are reluctant to adjust their assessment methods but also detest giving included students poor grades. In many cases, teachers are comfortable to include students with special learning needs, but are not prepared to include and work with children with more severe difficulties as well as monitor the progress of these learners with special needs which leads to unfair assessment. Assessing children with special needs is very challenging for the teachers and they often express the need for accurate and precise guidance in applying the assessment practices in the inclusive classrooms (Obi, Mensah & Avoke, 2007). Some special needs children struggle with testing situations and cannot remain at a task long enough to complete such assessments. But assessments are important; they provide the child with an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, skill, and understanding. For most learners with exceptionalities, a paper-and-pencil task should be at the bottom of the list of assessment strategies. Below are some alternate suggestions that support and enhance the assessment of children with special needs:

1. **Presentation:**A presentation is a verbal demonstration of skill, knowledge, and understanding. The child can narrate or answer questions about her task.

Presentation can also take the form of discussion, debate or a purely interrogatory exchange. Some children may require a small group or one-on-one setting; many children with special needs are intimidated by larger groups.

2. **Conference:** A conference is a one-on-one between the teacher and the student. The teacher will prompt and cue the student to determine the level of understanding and knowledge. Again, this takes the pressure away from written tasks. The conference should be somewhat informal to put the student at ease. The focus should be on the children sharing ideas, reasoning or explaining a concept. This is an extremely useful form of formative assessment.
3. **Interview:** An interview helps a teacher to clarify the level of understanding for a specific purpose, activity or learning concept. A teacher should have questions in mind to ask the student. A lot can be learned through an interview, but it can be time-consuming.
4. **Observation:** Observing a student in the learning environment is a very powerful assessment method. It can also be the vehicle for the teacher to change or enhance a specific teaching strategy. Observation can be done in a small group setting while the child is engaged in learning tasks. Things to look for include: Does the child persist? Give up easily? Have a plan in place? Look for assistance? Try alternate strategies? Become impatient? Look for patterns?
5. **Performance Task:** A performance task is a learning task that the child can do while the teacher assesses his performance. For example, a teacher may ask a student to solve a math problem by presenting a word problem and asking the child questions about it. During the task, the teacher is looking for skill and ability as well as the child's attitude toward the task. Does the child cling to past strategies or is there evidence of risk-taking in the approach?
6. **Self-Assessment:** It's always positive for learners to be able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. When possible, self-assessment can lead the learners to a better sense of understanding of her own learning. The teacher should ask some guiding questions that can lead to this discovery.

Teachers assess children's knowledge on a regular basis over the entire school year and provide pupils with information and feedback (orally) on their attainment of curricular objectives. However, the primary objective of teacher assessment is not the evaluation of knowledge but to encourage the children in their learning and to improve their interpersonal skill and as well as improve the overall management of the education process. Therefore, it is important for professionals to develop their own versions of ethical standards in assessment. E.g. the Council for Exceptional children in the year 1983 adopted a code of ethics and standard for professional practice, which addressed appropriate assessment procedures for exceptional individuals. Professional organization for children with special needs in Nigeria could follow suit by adopting its own code of practice for practitioners in the field of special education.

Challenges of Assessing Children with Special Needs in the Inclusive Classroom

In conducting and applying assessment of children with special needs, a number of problems could be envisaged and involved. This should not discourage teachers or all those involved in the assessment. All they requires is to assess with great caution and care, bearing in mind the problems involved in the course of assessment. Some of the challenges of assessment of children with specialneeds include the following:

- 1) **Lack of Special Trained Teachers:** The general teachers are mostly regular teachers without special training on teaching and assessment of learners with special needs. This may result to wrong placement. When these individuals are inadequately placed, they carry with them the negative baggage of labels and categories. They are considered as special population that as well opt for successful education. There are children who are with special needs and are usually assessed along with persons without special needs.
- 2) **Cultural Diversity:** Another major persistent problem in planning and carrying out meaningful assessment is that many assessment tools are of questionable value with a culturally diverse student population. This represents a special challenge for assessment personnel. Some are of the view that most tests of intelligent have an “Anglo centric” bias, it may be differences in language, or in the attitude of individual student, or it may be differences in critical life experiences, differences in how children relate to peers, or culturally related differences in attitude towards multiple-choice situations, or even in trial-and-error approaches or even other factors and influences. The bottom line here is that assessment of students must be approach with care and sensitivity considering all these differences (Ajobiewe&Ajobiewe, 2004).
- 3) **Socio-Cultural Factors that Influence Assessment Results:** The primary emphasis on the identification and assessment of socio-cultural factors, linguistic backgrounds etc, which permeate various learning or behaviour problems of students, exist and they influence assessment results. Also, that our educational programmes are based mostly on culturally based assumption about what should be learned, how, where and why they are important. Considering the fact that students come from different backgrounds it wage a lot of influence on how they react to assessment procedures. Assessment personnel must consider these and work hard to understand the learners’ cultural and linguistic background and make sure that the learner understands the language, intent and content of assessment instruments.
- 4) **Experiential Background:** Like cultural background, experiential background is a highly complex factor which overlaps cultural background (Gearheart&Gearheart 1990). Most often, students who live and school in rural areas have limited experiences and operate on that level of experience. Very likely they may not have had educational experiences that place them on the

same level with their counterparts who live and school in urban areas with all modern gadgets and facilities. Considering the assumption on which assessment tools are based, one would simply realize that they are not valid for many of these students. However, Ani (2006) pointed out some areas which may be required for assessment, to include, use of inquiry techniques, practice in making cause/ effects association, discovery (versus rote) learning, and other commonly used instructional strategies which may lead to below average achievement and perhaps referral for assessment etc. These areas should be adequately taken care of by assessment team, while considering students experimental background. If assessment is not properly handled it could also lead to serious underestimation of ability or achievement level, misinformation/ misunderstanding. Consequently, the learners should be lead or taught to adapt to general culture and the culture of the school and what obtains in their environment.

- 5) **Acculturation:** Another factor of importance is acculturation (i.e. adapting to a new cultural environment). Some children exhibit a significant relationship between ethnic majority group membership and referral for special education services. (Finn, 1982 & Collier, 1985). In Nigeria, the acculturation programme is utilized mostly for students who study different languages outside their ethnic majority group. Hence, referral is made to the ethnic majority group in order to relate to more experienced school staff and assessment personnel.
- 6) **Testing/Assessment Condition:** The condition under which assessment takes place is important in the procedure and type of assessment. According to Ani (2006) there should be a conducive, well spaced and significant reduction of extraneous and/or well lighted environment. The time for the test is equally very important especially when it is meant for younger children. Also, the test material as well as the examiners appearance and mannerism may influence test result too. Thus, when there are such condition that would influence test result of assessment, all these unusual conditions and deviation from normal test procedures must be carefully recorded by assessment personnel, so that adequate consideration and planning would be put in place.
- 7) **Test Anxiety:** This is another problem of assessment. Most children exhibit a high degree of anxiety which may lead to stress and tension. Others do so in jest. Sometimes, the anxiety results in poor grades and results. This might eventually lead to improper education programmes/services. It may even lead to underestimation of level of intellectual functioning. In order that these problems be limited or eliminated, test administrators would greatly reduce inaccurate conclusions.
- 8) **Validity and Rehabilitation of Measurement:** The validity and reliability of test instrument are absolutely essential. Validity is the most important consideration in test evaluation, if it is not valid for the purpose for which is meant for, the results would not be meaningful. Each test must be evaluated with respect to validity for the purpose it is meant for, and for purposes of

convenience, most often the test is categorized into the following content validity, predictive validity, concurrent validity, and construct validity. Where test instruments are not reliable or valid, measures does not exist. The data collected or assessment would be influenced, wrongly interpreted or biased and decision affected. However, the more the questions on the authenticity, validity and of test instrument the more the depth of assessment required for critical decisions and discussions. Reliability means stability or consistency. Reliability focus on the reliability of scores or measure obtained when successive measures are taken with the same instrument or with equivalent tests (Ani&Kalu,2022). Reliability can be determined, when data on most tests are meaningful, and test has a lower standard error or measurement. However, the problem with reliability is that reliability can be drastically reduced through test administrators and improper administration.

- 9) The number of special teachers is limited. There are only three special assistant teachers, one of whom is a special teacher in Bantul who only bashes twice a week. The ratio of children with special needs to special assistant teachers is not balanced. There are 34 students with special needs, with only three special teachers
- 10) Infrastructure facilities are still inadequate. Limited facilities and access for children with special needs at Taman Sari Public Elementary School.
- 11) Mindset teachers and parents still consider that children with special needs are not able to follow the learning process in regular schools.

Implications of Assessment to Children with Special Needs

Assessment as the ways teachers and other people involved in a pupil's education systematically collect and then use information about that pupil's level of achievement and/or development in different areas of their educational experience. Children with special needs assessment enables teachers to measure the effectiveness of their teaching by linking performance to specific learning objectives. As a result, teachers are able to institutionalize effective teaching choices and revise ineffective ones in their pedagogy. Assessment aims to celebrate diversity by identifying and valuing all pupils' progress and achievements. The purpose of inclusive assessment is to improve learning for all children with special educational needs in the inclusive classrooms. It also highlights the fact that there are different actors involved in assessment. Teachers, other school staff, external support staff, both parents and children themselves can potentially be involved in assessment procedures. All actors can use assessment information in different ways; - Assessment information is not only concerned with the pupil, but also the learning environment (and sometimes even the home environment). This implies that the information about children with special educational needs gathered through assessment is one of the main factors considered in an evaluation process, but it is not the only factor. Within the project, different assessment procedures and methods were considered and described.

As the focus was upon assessment of children with special educational needs in the inclusive classroom, then the clarification were: what is covered by the education sector in Nigeria and what is meant by an inclusive classroom. The first aspect was dealt with in a pragmatic way - the Nigerian policy on Education have clearly defined in their document what age range and forms of provision are covered within the basic sector of education. Agreements on what settings are considered 'inclusive' are not so clear. According to Meijer, (2003) an operational definition of inclusive settings has been employed as those educational settings where children with special needs follow the largest part of the curriculum in the inclusive classroom alongside peers without special educational needs. Inclusive classroom has a positive impact on learning in Nigerian school. It can be seen in the following cases.

- i. Class teachers are responsible for creating a classroom atmosphere that fully accommodates all children by emphasizing social atmosphere and behavior that respects differences. This is because inclusive education is an education that can create and maintain a class society that is warm, accepts, and appreciates differences
- ii. The accommodative curriculum for students with special needs to be developed by its potential. The paradigm shift from a competitive learning approach to a cooperative learning approach that involves collaboration between students.
- iii. Application of active learning methods in inclusive classrooms and buddy systems. This creates interactive learning and collaboration between teachers and their pupils.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has thrown light on the assessment of learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms. The assessment of learners with special learning needs has deeply rooted problems, stemming from unclear policies, development of sustainable teacher training and teacher support mechanisms in dealing with the many forms of learning needs that the students have. Teachers in the educational process have difficulty in their efforts to assess the knowledge accurately and adequately when it comes to students with special educational needs, especially those involved in the inclusive classrooms. The school administrator need to provide teacher-educators with facilities that will enable them to possess the skills needed, understand the curriculum, new methods, and techniques in teaching for the attainment of the goals and objectives of special education. The chapter discusses children with special needs and several assessment measures that teachers can utilize and the challenges in assessing special needs children in inclusive classrooms.

Suggestions

Assessing children with special needs in an inclusive classroom can be a very interesting and exciting experience where the following suggestions are taken into consideration:

1. There is need for legal frameworks to be in place to protect the children with special needs from neglect, social stigma and prejudice if the problems of assessment of these children are to be effectively dealt with and the learners empowered to reach their individual maximum potentials in life.
2. Furthermore, the highlighted assessment methods for assessing children with special needs can be adopted by many teachers in the assessment of children with special needs in an inclusive classroom in Nigeria for effective teaching and learning.
3. The inclusion of children with special needs in the classrooms should be adopted by teachers as a key for effective implementation Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4).
4. Inclusive classroom should be a tool to enable communities, structures and systems to combat discrimination and harmful stereotypes, to recognise diversity, to promote participation, and to overcome barriers to learning for all.
5. All children deserve to feel safe, heard, and supported in the classroom. Only then can they begin to be educated and inspired.
6. Classroom discrimination which can take many forms and have serious impacts on learning should be discouraged.
7. Cooperation between teachers and other professions in one team is needed, such as with parents, special assistant teachers, psychologists, pediatricians, therapists, and so on.

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