

# ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN EARLIER EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

This approach is important not only for teaching children and adults, but also The purpose of assessment is to identify teaching goals. Incidentally, assessment of children with learning difficulties has not been given the urgent it deserves. The vital issue is how do teachers instruct children of this category effectively without the needed assessment data and information to make instructional decision? The paper pointed out that assessment procedure will include a diagnostic history of the child's development from parent and other sources. It also discussed the strategic issues involved in assessing the language I communication, cognitive and mathematical abilities of child with learning difficulty in order to determine the areas of strengths and weaknesses of the children it concluded that obtaining information and opinion about the child through a comprehensive evaluation can be helpful in synthesizing and planning appropriate educational programme for these class children. Furthermore, the most effective teaching approach is to use and enhance existing skills and recognize with acceptance the short coming to be improved. This approach not only teaching children and adults, but also for parents and other professionals.

Assessment is the process of measuring behaviour and using the results obtained in taking relevant decisions about only teaching and learning. It involves the collection of information about a child's knowledge, skill and attitudes as well as judgment, interpretation and planned action (David and Lewis, 1991).

Assessment lies at the heart of promoting learning which is the principal aim of education. It is both essential and integral to effective teaching and learning. It can provide a framework n which educational objectives may be set and pupil's progress charted and expressed.

Assessment refers to the systematic collection of data that gives information about an individual. It also gives information about the strengths and weaknesses of a child. It has to do with what the individual can do and cannot do; how the person does what he/she does and how best to do it, and what the individual needs to learn to do next.

One major learning difficulty popularly known as autism is a serious mental condition that makes it difficult for someone to react to and communicate with other people. It is a lifelong and complex developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. Autism affects the language, communication, emotion, cognitive, behaviour, fine and gross motor skills (Wing, 2003), Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder and its pervasive means that it can only be effectively addressed if assessment is carried across the range of the child's experiences.

Assessment, according to Gumut, (2001), if well designed and objectively carried out, should serve the following purposes:

- (i) Elicit answers to specific questions;
- (ii) Determine many attributes of individual child's working styles;
- (iii) Give rise to records of what individual student or the entire class can do'
- (iv) Give feedback about pupil's progress and allow room for improvement;
- (v) It is a vital tool for resorting and monitoring pupils progress over short and long term basis
- (vi) Assessment tasks are very effective mechanism for further improvement and motivation.

Appropriate assessment is a critical prerequisite for effective instruction. Teachers need to know what skills children with autism already possess before they can make decisions about instructional objectives. Information about a child's ability and proficiency in important skill areas can be gathered through both formal and informal measures.

## **Types of Assessment**

### **(a) Formal Assessment:**

Formal assessment involves using an already made battery of tests in evaluation. Examples of such tests include: Peabody Picture Test, Vocabulary Test, Pictorial Test, Good-enough Harris Drawing Test, Mental Abilities Test. among others standardized assessment scores and their results can be important means of identifying the needs of children with autism early.

One of the problems encountered in applying any standardized assessment tests to individuals with autism is the fact as explained by Jordan and Powell (1995) “that such tests often assume a normal developmental route in the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Autism, however, is characterized by deviance from this normal developmental path way and therefore, scoring on tests needs to ensure that the results are not misleading”.

Yet, one-to-one sessions and formal tests may be useful to identify particular problems or to obtain a norm-related score that will enable comparisons with others for research or administration reasons. If the prime purpose is to obtain information on the individual’s strengths and/ weaknesses for teaching purposes then such formal assessments will need to be supplemented by observational assessments of functioning in everyday settings and or by structured interviews or check lists filled in by those with ongoing daily contact with the children.

### **(b) Informal Assessment**

Informal assessment includes everything the teacher does in order to find out what to teach the child. It is a teacher-made test. Preparing an informal assessment test instrument, in the words of (Avoke, Hayford, Ihenacho and Octoo, 1998, demands that a test constructor should do the following:

- i. Observe the child in and out of the classroom;
- ii. Look through the child’s previous records;
- iii. Visit the child’s home and discuss with the parents or guardian,
- iv. Discuss with the child’s previous teacher
- v. Prepare special test for the child in the various skill areas (P.27).

Careful evaluation of each individual involves both formal assessment (the best and most appropriate tests available) and informal assessment, (the best and most thoughtful observations possible by the teachers) Parents and all others in regular contact with the child). In other words, (the best understanding of each individual’s learning or behaviour problems and strengths is needed to identify the best individualized treatment available.

Numerous guidelines to direct assessment of the children with learning difficulties in a special services programme are available to the special educator. However, limited direction has been offered to the classroom teacher who bears responsibility for initial identification, academic diagnosis, and appropriate referral of learners who present evidence of a handicapping condition. Since the success of the programme for children with learning difficulties ultimately rests on evaluation results, there are compelling reasons to utilize the information of assessment at the earliest stage of the diagnosis continuum.

### **(a) Parents**

During admission, parents should diagnostic history of the child’s development in order to give a full picture. This is because it is clear that parents are in an ideal position to help in this respect. For instance, it is possible for parents of the children with learning difficulties to give plausible explanations as to how they themselves were at fault in relating to and handling their young children (Jordan and Powell, 1995).

### **(b) Incidental Observation**

To begin to arrive at an initial identification of pupils who may failure, the assessor should make use of readily available information, (Moran, 2000). From the first day, he or she can gather informal impressions. These impressions can be categorized by dividing the class according to the following two preliminary questions:

- (i) Which pupils demonstrate age, appropriate and academic behaviours within normal range for children in this classroom?

- (ii) Which pupils stand out in some way as exhibiting unusual academic behaviours? These questions lead to the information of two groups of learners in the classroom and they focus on academic behaviours only. At the identification stage, the assessor should attempt not more than a simple dichotomy. In the first group will be those pupils whose academic performance is unremarkable. In the second group will be those who exhibit behaviours which set them apart in some way when their academic performance is compared with that of the typical learner at that level. To be effective as an initial screening approach, this dichotomy must be taken literally. Every learner who stands out academically from the typical pupils of the assessor's experience with a given task must be considered for further assessment.

**(c) School Records**

The first source of additional information is the school cumulative record file. If data are summarized on a single card, the card usually shows the date of birth, date of school entry, previous schools attended, and names of previous teachers, attendance records, and grades for each subject for each year of attendance. If group measures of intellectual functioning have been administered, the card also shows the Intelligent Quotient, (I.Q) of each child. Some cards also allow room for brief anecdotal comments by the teacher(s).

The first step in using information in school records is to determine any record of a pupil in the risk group having been referred for evaluation by a previous teacher or perhaps assigned to special education services in the past.

The second step is to determine the pattern of performance in previous years. In doing this, it is essential to establish the time of onset of academic problems. If the record indicates that below average performance began in first year of school and continued to the present, the question of developmental disabilities may be raised. But where the child performed well in early years but demonstrated a reversal in later years, a situational disturbance or emotional problem made be suggested.

The third inspection should be a comparison of the pattern of scores with the attendance record. The record should be checked for length of absences, time of the year when they focused and the scores which followed each period of absence. Inspection of the absence record may reveal that low grades occurred only after periods of frequent or lengthy absence, or that a child missed enough instruction in early years to account for failure to master basic academic skills.

The fourth source of information in the record is the number of schools the pupils has attended. In a mobile society, it is not unusual to discover that a school child may have attended two or more different schools. The results of frequent moves are similar to those of chronic absence, in that continuity of instruction is disrupted.

**(d) Work Products**

The last source of available information in the series, is the daily work products of the child. Although a detailed analysis of work production is appropriately called diagnosis rather than identification. Certain aspects of the learner's characteristics may become apparent upon cursory examination of work products. For example, Fine-motor skills such as copying letters or numerals, drawing figures, arranging school related materials and organizing puzzle parts can be assessed from work products.

The quantity of work produced in a given time is also of interest if it differs from that of the typical learners. Work products can reveal whether the child approach to tasks is disorganized, incomplete, or prone to careless errors.

In addition to the above, assessment should be carried out in other relevant skill areas, which may include the following:

**(1) Language Ability**

A vocabulary test at a simple level might have four pictures of different objects. e.g. a Cap, a car, a dog and a bag. Then, a test of grammatical understanding might have four action pictures.

For example, one picture of a dog under a bed, one of a dog on a bed, one of a dog beside a bed, and one of a dog in a bed to test for understanding of the preposition 'under'. In each case, the child has to point to the correct picture following the instructions of the tester in respect to the item being assessed. For example, for testing 'under' as in the illustration above, the child would be told to show 'the picture of a dog under the bed'. Sometimes, this may pose some problem.

It is in the use of this instruction that the potential confusion lies because many children with autism will understand ‘under but do not understand the word ‘show’. For this reason, it is useful for the tester to teach, the meaning of words like ‘show’ first before testing. Unfortunately, testing does not need to wait for such knowledge to be acquired. Besides, it may violate the strict standardization procedures for validating a test. Thus, the instruction can be altered to avoid the use of ‘show’ by substituting it with ‘point to...’ or ‘put your hand on...’ Once the child is given an instruction that is understood, then it becomes possible to fulfill the purposes of the test in testing the understanding of the particular forms it was designed to examine.

## **(2) Cognitive Ability**

The assessment of cognitive ability and in particular, the use of intelligent Quotient (IQ) tests in learning difficulties is controversial. The controversy about the use of I.Q.

Tests however is concerned more with their validity than their reliability. Due to the patchy kind of performance that is typical of children with autism on I.Q. tests, any comparisons with other groups (as might be needed to get matched groups for some research reason), is best done on the particular subtests that are relevant to the comparisons being made.

However, I.Q. tests have been shown to be very reliable measures of cognitive ability in autism. Sometimes, procedural changes need to be made to gain cooperation and understanding, but these are seldom severe enough to impair the usefulness of the test. In that case, the test performance can be enhanced simply by giving the child for example, a picture of a man holding and running with a stick and also a picture of a snake trying to escape. The task of the child, sp be to interpret what is going on n the picture. Without the pictorial representation of the action, the child might be confused, when told that a man is ‘running after a snake’. He may spend fruitless time and effort trying to understand what he had been told.

That is why the most useful cognitive tests are often those devised for the nonverbal child which will frequently give a true picture of potential, even for the child with spoken language ability, (Schools, 1995). It is also important to give notes on the process of taking the test in order to avoid failure and enhance success. Such a note will give a much better guide to how the child is thinking and learning than a bare score.

## **(3) Communicative Ability**

This involves assessing the child’s capacity to use and understand the various modes of communication. Vocabulary is then assessed, followed by form, i.e. the level of communicative functions the child has are then assessed. Finally, the context is also assessed because the behaviour that is found in one context. may not be present in another, For example, to find out if a child has problem with communication, a simple checklist of this nature can be constructed by the teacher to enable him identify whether or not a communication problem exists.

## **(4) Checklist for children with learning difficulties**

- i. Child always appreciates the use and pleasure of communication.
- ii. Child cannot use pronounces appropriately e.g. “I and you”.
- iii. Child lacks response to verbal request..
- iv. Child shows abnormality in the production of speech
- v. Child has difficulty using gestures, facial expressions and bodily posture (Okwudire, 2003).

With the above checklist, the assessor will be able to identify a child that has social communication problem and be able to offer necessary assistance.

## **(5) Mathematical Ability**

Mathematical disabilities are as prevalent as difficulties in other academic areas. Common mathematical difficulties of children with learning difficulties include basic operations, measurement skills and understanding of the language of mathematics (Okwudire, 2003).

Performance in Mathematics is based on an understanding of conceptual operations. In order to determine whether or not a child has problem with Maths, the following basic pre-number learning can be assessed.

- i. Child is able to match objects that are the same.

- ii. Child is able to write numerals from 0 to 10 (getting the sequence correct, overcoming reversals and distortions).
- iii. Child is able to match and sort small and large objects or stones
- iv. Child is able to match and sort different sizes of cut out shapes
- v. Child is able to place rings on a tower according to size
- vi. Child is able to place 10 graduated rods in other according to length.

Assessment of this nature and more in related skill areas will go a long way in providing useful information to the teacher regarding the strengths and weaknesses of a child with autism. This will lead to statement of goals and consequently, programme of action for the child.

In developing a programme for the treatment and education for children with autism and similar children assessment information is paramount.

Assessment information help in defining programme priorities. Thus, the most effective teaching approach is to use and enhance existing skills and recognize with acceptance the short coming to be improved.

### **Conclusion**

Assessment information is a vital tool in the hands of the professional teacher. It directs, guides and protects both the teacher and the learner at every stage of academics.

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