

PRACTITIONERS' UNDERSTANDING OF ASSESSMENT IN EARLY YEARS IN DELTA NORTH SENATORIAL DISTRICT

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Abstract

Many practitioners do not clearly understand the nature and scope of assessment in the early years. This study, therefore, focused on Practitioners' understanding of the assessment of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. The descriptive research method was used for the study. The study's target population was all the Delta North Senatorial District nursery teachers. However, one hundred and eight teachers were purposively selected for the study from 2 Local Government Areas in the District. Three research questions were raised, and one null hypothesis was formulated to guide this study. The instrument used for data collection was

developed and validated by the researcher; it was tagged 'Practitioners Understanding of Assessment in Early Years'. The result established no relationship between what they think they know and what they should know. In actual practice, most of the practitioners sampled do not understand the nature and scope of assessment in early years. Recommendations were made amongst which that practitioners working with children below age six in both public and private settings should be retrained on the nature of assessment in the early years to avoid the challenge of over schooling children.

Keywords: Assessment, early years, practitioners, understanding

Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of good teaching that involves identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a pupil. Assessment and evaluation though sometimes used interchangeably, are both concerned with getting feedback for making a decision. Literature has identified three significant types of evaluation or assessment; diagnostic, formative and summative (Guide to Assessment in Early Childhood, 2008.) Diagnostic evaluation has a placement function and so takes place before instruction. It may be used to determine the presence of prerequisite skills, determine the pupil's prior mastery level, or classify the pupils according to various characteristics related to instruction. Diagnostic evaluation may also determine the underlying causes of learning difficulties. While formative evaluation takes place *during instruction*. It provides a check for the teacher and the pupils on progress concerning what has been taught. Summative evaluation is a review process that takes place *after instruction*.

The importance of assessment in the classroom cannot be overemphasized. It helps the teacher know what the learner has learnt, progress made, identification of any challenge and a host of other benefits already identified. Why do we assess infants, toddlers and preschoolers in early years settings.? It is necessary to look at the objectives of Early Childhood Education before the relevance of assessment at this stage of education. The National Policy on Education (2013) outlines the Early Childhood Education objectives as::

- Effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school.
- Preparing the child for the primary level of education.
- Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work.
- Creating individuals who are responsible citizens.

- Inculcating in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through exploring nature and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities, etc.
- Teaching cooperation and team spirit
- Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc., through play.
- Teaching of good habits, especially good health habits

Assessment in early childhood should therefore focus on whether these objectives are achieved or not. Indeed, assessment of these objectives cannot be through teacher-made formal testing and examination. The assessment of young children is to collect information necessary to make important decisions about their developmental and educational needs. Assessment must always serve in ways that enhance opportunities for optimal growth, development, and learning. Practical assessment of young children according to Southern Early Childhood Association (2000).

- Emphasizes emerging development in all developmental domains: physical/motor, psychosocial, cognitive, language, and literacy development.
- Focuses on individual strengths and uniqueness.
- Is based on sound principles of child growth and development.
- Emanates from authentic (logical, meaningful, relevant, and applicable) curricula
- Is intertwined with instruction.
- Is performance, process, and product-based.
- Is ongoing and occurs in many contexts.
- Recognizes and supports different bits of intelligence and learning styles.
- Minimizes or alleviates child stress to ensure the best (or most successful) outcomes.
- Is reflective and analytic, honest and accurate, instructive and useful.
- Is collaborative with learners, parents, teachers, and professional specialists as needed

In the early years, it is vital to understand the nature of the learners and their developmental process before discussing the concept of assessment. The developmental process is classified into physical, social, cognitive, emotional and language domains. Infants and toddlers are going through critical periods in these domains of development. There is the need to closely look at the indicators of growth in these domains of development:

Physical Development-This is the advancements and refinements of motor skills; that is how children's abilities to use and control their bodies. It relates to the growth and skill development of the body, including the brain, muscles and senses (Egede & Omumu, 2003). The physical domain, according to Eraser-Thill (2021), covers the development of physical changes, which include growth in size and strength, as well as the development of both gross motor skills and fine motor skills

Cognitive Development-This relates to how children grow in thinking/exploring and figuring things out. It is the development of knowledge, skills, and understanding the world around them. Child psychologist Jean Piaget outlined four stages of cognitive development, but two covers the period of infancy and toddlerhood under discussion. They are Sensorimotor Stage (Birth to Age 2) -This stage involves learning about the environment through movements and sensations. Infants and toddlers use basic actions like sucking, grasping, looking, and listening to learn about the world around them (Egede & Omumu 2003).

Preoperational Stage (Ages 2 to 7) - Children at this stage learn to think symbolically and use words or pictures to represent things during this stage. Kids in this stage enjoy pretend play but struggle with logic and understanding another person's perspective.

Social-Emotional Development-This covers when a child learns to interact with others around them. A child grows to perceive his individuality within his community and gains the skills to communicate with others and process their actions. It is also the period to recognize, express and manage feelings at different stages of life and to have empathy for the feelings of others. This domain includes developing attachments to others and learning how to interact with them. For instance, children learn how to share, take turns, and accept differences in others. They also develop many relationships, from parents and siblings to peers, teachers, coaches, and community members. (Eraser-Thrill, 2021)

Language Development-It is the process and stages through which children come to understand and communicate language. Aspects of language include:

- Phonology: Creating the sounds of speech
- Pragmatics: Communicating verbally and non-verbally in social situations
- Semantics: Understanding the rules of what words mean

Syntax: Using grammar and putting sentences together. (Eraser-Thrill, 2021)

According to Chenube (2019), children need to be observed regularly (during this period of rapid and constant growth and development). This assessment would help educators build an overview of how infants' and toddlers' development is progressing over time – this is known as 'tracking development'. Regular tests and examinations used for the conventional learning process cannot track this development. Educators with very robust knowledge of child development will be able to identify the following:

-The skills a child has already developed, and the learning achieved.

The skills and learning a child is currently consolidating (strengthening through practice or repeated experience)

The skills and learning a child is likely to develop or achieve next.

Whether a child is experiencing difficulties in any area of their learning and development, Practitioners can do all these by comparing a child's current stage of development with the expected development pattern for a child of that age. This is to help educators identify if the child is going through any challenge, pinpoint the cause of the difficulty and plan interventions to solve such learning and developmental needs

There is a growing concern about what practitioners are doing with young children on assessment in Nigeria because of practitioners' ignorance of the nature, scope and purpose of assessment in the early years. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is a paucity of literature in this regard in Nigeria. Therefore, this study aims to empirically document the perceived understanding and actual practice of practitioners on assessment in early years in Nigeria. Three research questions were raised, and one null hypothesis was formulated to guide this study:

- Do practitioners in the early years understand the nature and methods of assessment in early years?
- Do practitioners in early years understand that other domains of development should be assessed?
- Do practitioners in the early years use suitable assessments tools while assessing children?

The study hypothesized that there will be no significant differences in practitioners' assessment practice in the early years.

Methodology

The descriptive design was used for this study to determine the extent to which the participants understood the concept of assessment in the early years. Questionnaire forms were used to collect data from selected nursery teachers in Delta North Senatorial District. The target population for this study consisted of all the nursery teachers in public and private schools in the North Senatorial District of Delta State. The method used in sample selection for this study is the purposive sampling technique. The first stage was the selection of two Local Government Areas in the Senatorial District (Ika South and Ika North East). The second stage was the selection of 20 schools from the two Local Government Areas. The third stage was the selection of respondents for the study; all the Nursery teachers in the selected schools took part in the study. A total of 120 respondents participated in the study from the twenty schools. The instrument used for the study was designed by the researcher and validated by experts in early years and Educational Psychologists, and was titled: Practitioners' Understanding of Assessment in Early Years Questionnaire. The Questionnaire is divided into two sections, i.e. A and B. Section A deals with the personal data of the respondents, i.e. demographic data such as gender, years of experience and teaching qualification.

While Section B covers items on what should be the scope of assessment in early years, the questionnaires were administered by the researcher and two trained research assistants. The research assistants were trained on how to administer the questionnaire effectively. The researcher and her assistants administered 120 questionnaire forms in the 20 schools in two Local Government Areas in the North Senatorial District of Delta State- Ika South and Ika North East) but only 108 questionnaires were properly filled and returned

In analyzing the data gathered for this study, the researcher used frequency counts, straightforward percentages, means and standard deviations for Section A which is the personal data. The primary data from other sections of the questionnaire forms were analyzed using Stepwise Regression, Analysis of variance and the t-test.

Results

The essential demographic characteristics of the precursory teachers used for this study are evaluated in this Section, ranging from their gender, qualification and years of teaching experience.

Table 1: Respondents' Gender

Gender:	Male	14
	Female	94
Total		108

Table 1 above shows that out of the 108 respondents, 14 are males while 94 are females.

Table 2: Years of Experience

Years of Experience:	
Below 5 Years	15
Above 5 -10 Years	40
Above 10 years – 20 Years	45
Above 20 Years	08
Total	108

Table 2 shows that 15 of the respondents have below 5 years teaching experience, 40 have above 5 -10 years teaching experience, 45 respondents have above 10 years' experience while 8 have above 20 years

Table 3: Teaching Qualifications

Teaching qualifications :	
WAEC/SSCE	10
TCII	02
NCE	59
OND/ HND	06
Degree in Education	28
Degree in other Fields	08
Total	108

Table 3 shows the teaching qualifications of the respondents, 10 out of 108 are WAEC/SSCE holder, 2 have TCII, 59 are NCE HOLDERS, 6 have OND/HND, 28 have a degree in education while 8 have degrees in other fields

Table 4: Research Question 1: Do practitioners in early years think they understand the nature and methods of assessment in early years?

		Response			
		Yes		No	
Responses		N	%	N	%
Gender:	Male	13	93.9	1	7.1
	Female	91	96.8	3	3.2
Total		104	96.3	4	3.7
Years of Experience		40	100	0	0
		44	97.8	1	2.2
		8	100	0	0
Total		104	96.3	4	3.7
Qualification:	SSCE 1	12	100	0	0
	TCII 2	3	100	0	0
	NCE 3	58	98.3	1	1.7
	OND/HND 4	6	100	0	0
	Deg. in Edu 5	23	88.5	3	11.5
	Deg. In other field 6	2	100	0	0
Total		104	96.3	4	3.7

Table 4 shows that 13 (93.9%) and 91 (96.8%) of male and female teachers respectively think they understand assessment in early years.

Table 5: Research Question 2: Do practitioners think that they have proper or wrong understanding of assessment in the early years?

		Response			
		Yes		No	
Responses		N	%	N	%
Gender:	Male	13	92.9	1	7.1
	Female	73	77.7	21	22.3
Total		86	79.6	22	20.4
Experience:	1	12	80.0	3	20.0
	2	33	82.5	7	17.5
	3	35	77.8	10	22.2
	4	6	75.0	2	25.0
Total		86	79.6	22	20.4
Qualification:	SSCE 1	9	75.0	3	25.0
	TCII 2	3	100	0	0
	NCE 3	43	72.9	16	27.1
	OND/HND 4	6	100	0	0
	Deg. in Edu 5	23	88.5	3	11.5
	Deg. In other fields 6	2	100	0	0
Total		86	79.6	22	20.4

Table 5 shows that 13 (92.9%) and 73 (77.78%) of male and female teachers respectively showed the wrong practice of assessment. Their responses were positive to wrong methods of assessing children.. The majority of the teachers were of the opinion that tests and examinations should be the medium of assessing nursery children, and they should be allowed to repeat if they fail such formal testing. This showed that do not understand what the nature of assessment is in the early years

Research Question 3: Do Nursery teachers understand that the component of assessment in early years?

Table 6: Nursery Teachers' understanding on the scope of assessment in early years

			Assessment of all domains of Development				Assessment report of a child's progress			
			Yes		No		Yes		No	
Responses			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender:	Male		11	78.6	3	21.4	14	100	0	0
	Female		65	69.1	29	30.9	91	96.8	3	3.2
Total			76	70.4	32	29.6	105	97.2	3	2.8
Experience:	1		5	33.2	10	66.7	14	93.3	1	6.7
	2		31	77.5	9	22.5	39	97.5	1	2.5
	3		33	73.3	12	26.7	44	97.8	1	2.2
	4		7	87.5	1	12.5	8	100	0	0
Total			76	70.4	32	29.6	105	97.2	3	2.8
Qualification:	SSCE	1	7	58.3	5	41.7	12	100	0	0
	TCII	2	3	100	0	0	3	100	0	0
	NCE	3	42	71.2	17	28.8	59	100	0	0
	OND/HND	4	4	66.7	2	33.3	6	100	0	0
	Deg. in Edu	5	19	73.1	7	26.9	23	88.5	3	11.5
	Deg. In other field	6	1	50.0	1	50.0	2	100	0	0
Total			76	70.4	32	29.6	105	97.2	3	2.8

Table 6 shows that 11(78.6%) males and 65(69.1%) females agreed that all domains of development of nursery children should be assessed. On assessment as a report of children's progress, the result showed that 14(100%) males and 91(96.8%) females agreed that assessment should be reporting children's progress

Research Hypothesis: There is no significant difference between practitioners' perceived understanding of assessment and their actual practice of assessment in early years

Table 7: Spearman's rho correlation on Respondents' responses to RQ1 and RQ2

Spearman's rho	Understanding of Assessment	Actual Practices
Spearman's rho	correlation coefficient	- .3
	Sig	.14
	N	108

Table 7 shows that the Spearman's rho correlation coefficient is - .3, which is significant at $p=.14$. Hence, there is no significant relationship between practitioners' perceived understanding and actual practice of assessment in the early years. The value -.3 indicates that the coefficient is negatively low. This shows that as teachers claim they understand assessment in early years (positive), their actual practice is wrong (negative).

Discussion

The study has revealed that most practitioners think they understand the concept and nature of assessment in the early years. However, almost all responded positively that they understand what it means to assess children in their early years. The plausible explanation for this position may be because more than half of them have a background in education. So, naturally, they will think they have done courses in school that should naturally make them understand assessment. The years of experience too might be another plausible explanation for their claim; 80% of 0-1 years, 100% of 2-5 years, 97.8% of 5-11 years, and 100% of above ten years of experience think they understand assessment in the early years. The study results showed that many of the practitioners think they understand the nature of assessment in the early years. However, they responded positively to unfair assessment practices in the early years. Practices like subjecting young children to rigorous testing and examinations and asking nursery children to repeat classes if they fail. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers' assessments should not be quantified or used for promotion but should focus on finding out what they have learnt

Finally, the findings showed no relationship between what practitioners perceived understanding and their actual practice when assessing children. This revealed a severe need that relevant stakeholders should address. If the handlers of children do not know what to look for in the process of assessing, then there will be the challenge of over-schooling. It is common knowledge that in most early years setting in Nigeria, children are over-schooled through the burden of homework, formal testing of the curriculum and other strenuous activities that make children not enjoy childhood.

Conclusion

The study has established that practitioners, and teachers of children in Early Childhood settings, think they understand the concept of assessment in the early years. However, the study has revealed that they have wrong notions on early years assessment in actual practice. The study has established no significant relationship between what they think and what it should be. This should be a serious concern because of the challenge of over-schooling. Considering the age and developmental process at this stage, over-schooling should be expected when practitioners do not understand what to look for in the assessment process and how to look for it. Over schooling is giving more than is required, creating a burden for young children.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- The Government should show sincere concern for the education of its young citizens. The concern should reflect their care and education. The schooling of children in the early years that is evident in the cognitive activities and assessment should be reviewed empirically.
- The Federal and State Ministries of Education have so much to do with helping practitioners understand what Early Childhood Education is all about in terms of curriculum content, developmental domains and appraisal aims and strategies.
- All practitioners working with children below age six in public and private settings should be retrained on the nature of assessment in the early years.

- Practitioners in public and private settings should access assessment tools to enhance their assessment skills.
- There should be constant robust monitoring from all relevant stakeholders of the actual practice in the classroom.

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