Early Childhood Assessment: Implications for the Development of Responsive Readiness Skills, Child Care and Early Intervention in Nigeria

Adebisi, Rufus Olanrewaju (Corresponding Author)
Department of Special Education & Rehabilitation Sciences
School of Postgraduate Studies, Faculty of Education, P.M.B. 2084. Jos. Plateau State
University of Jos
Email: aderufus2@gmail.com

Iroham, Nduibuisi Sylvester
Special Needs Education & Braille Unit
Nigerian Educational Research & Development Council (NERDC)
Sheda. Abuja.
Email: nduiroham@yahoo.com

Amwe, Racheal Asibi
Department of Special Education & Rehabilitation Sciences
Faculty of Education, P.M.B. 2084. Jos. Plateau State, University of Jos
Email: amweasibi4@yahoo.com

RASAKI, Suraju Ademola
Special Education Unit, FCT Universal Basic Education Board
Garki, Abuja.

Abstract

The assessment process is a significant event for families and their children; the outcome of this process could mean specialized interventions that could significantly change a child's developmental course. Assessment, of course, is important for eligibility determination but also equally important for programme planning, monitoring progress and programme evaluation. Since this process is so vital to families and professionals, it is equally imperative that materials and procedures for early childhood assessment are relevant and meaningful. in this paper, the writers attempted to discuss the policy and practice of early childhood education in Nigeria; principles behind taking assessment as pertained to policies and guidelines; the areas

to be assessed in children were enumerated; purposes of assessment in early childhood education were discussed; the structure of the early childhood classroom in order to effectively facilitate social interaction were suggested and stakeholders and best practices in children assessment and intervention for professionals were recommended.

Key Words: Early childhood, Assessment, Early Intervention, Child care, Early Intervention

1. Introduction

Children often develop rapidly and experiencing tremendous change and growth physically, cognitively, linguistically, and socially. (Sameroff & Fiese, 1990). Little children, for example, seem to contest from one milestone to the next. Nonetheless, the rate of growth and development among young children varies greatly. Indeed, as a result of this high variability during early childhood, evident in nearly any environment with children in pre-primary and kindergarten classes, many professionals balk at labelling children as learning disabled. However, because studies indicate that early intervention can make a significant difference in a child's development, many other professionals want to respond promptly when they note developmental delays or see that certain children are not meeting typical expectations. When this is the case, an appropriate evaluation is necessary to determine whether or not a child will benefit from early intervention and, if so, what kind of intervention. Moreover, an individual comprehensive evaluation that examines at-risk indicators, makes identifications, and advocates service delivery that will be appropriate. This is especially true for children with suspected learning disabilities whose profiles frequently exhibit intracognitive differences that can obscure overall abilities.

In the context of an expanding array of programmes aimed at early childhood intervention, the assessment of young children's development and learning has recently taken new importance. Private and government organizations are developing programmes to enhance the school readiness of all young children, especially children from economically disadvantaged homes and communities and children with special needs (Berube, 1994). These programmes are designed to enhance social, language, and academic skills through responsive early care and education. In addition, they provide settings to identify and offer appropriate interventions to children with developmental problems.

The expansion of early child care and intervention programmes has been accompanied by calls for accountability for these initiatives, especially those that are publicly funded. School systems and government agencies are asked to set goals, establish standards, track progress, analyze strengths and weaknesses in programmes, and report on their achievements, with consequences for unmet goals. Early childhood education and intervention programmes are increasingly called on to prove their worth in similar ways. Assessment of children is a frequently used tool for accountability efforts, and it is also used for a number of other purposes in early childhood programmes.

Bagnato and Neisworth (1991), defines early childhood assessment as a flexible, collaborative, decision-making process in which teams of parents and professionals revise their judgments and reach consensus about the changing developmental, educational, medical and mental health service of young children and their families. No preschooler comes

to school with Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) from homes. Few do tend to have fairly serious and pervasive disabilities or delays that disrupt basic early development in communication, motor, social, and cognitive areas. Sometimes these youngsters have been receiving medical rather than special services from the time they were infants, maybe from homes and hospitals. In reality, the abilities of young children fall along a continuum, and the majority of infants who are referred to special schools enter preschool with unidentified problems in learning and development.

Early intervention is very important for all children especially for children with special needs. The very early years of a child are fundamental, to a large degree and they establish how the child is going to cope with and manage his environment. Kazaure (2014) affirms that early intervention impacts helpfully on the overall well- being of the child and his family. This implies that early assessment of the child will enable the professionals feel concern about the health and education of the child, to detect any possible disability and be able to quickly find solution to the child's problems. In other words, early intervention ensures that children who have difficulties learning receive the help they need as soon as possible, and that parents of children with special needs have access to suitable childcare.

Maturation is a powerful force at this age, and the typical range of knowledge and skills from "just five" to "almost six" is quite substantial. Many of the children who struggle early in their preschool years do, in fact, mature by leap. But other youngsters enter preschool with serious learning problems. (Eberstadt, 1999).

In this paper, the writers will attempt to discuss the overview of early childhood education in Nigeria; principles behind taking assessment as pertained to policies and guidelines; the areas to be assessed in children will be enumerated; purposes of assessment in early childhood education will also be discussed; the structure of the early childhood classroom in order to effectively facilitate social interaction will be suggested and stakeholders and best practices in children assessment and intervention for professionals will be recommended.

2. Nigeria's Policy and Practice of Early Childhood Education

Studies have shown that many parents in the past in Nigeria do not value early elementary education due to ignorance and lack of awareness which government at all levels should shoulder. Usman (2013) reported Adebusoye (1981) that provision of nursery education in Lagos, Western Nigeria showed that 7.7% out of 948 parents sent their children to either nursery or a group care centre. It could be deduced that parents did not value pre-primary due to ignorance and the unawareness about the system at that time.

Customarily, Early Childhood Education (ECE) exists in various informal forms in both rural and urban societies, aimed at producing individuals with behaviour patterns, abilities and skills necessary for successful citizenship in the society. To formalized the programmes through the an act, is to enable every child has equal opportunity and right to education, this necessitated the 1998 National Policy on Education, on Early Childhood Education.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004) has also expanded the scope which includes programmes and initiatives for early childhood education and development. The UBE Programme has made provision for every public primary school to have a Pre-Primary school linkage to cater for children aged 3-5 years. The act is silent on early childhood education and development in the age group 0-3 years (UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE), 2006).

Federal and State Inspectorate Services, in collaboration with Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBS) (these two bodies, UBEC and SUBEBS, have statutory mandate for basic, i.e primary and pre-primary, education) in Nigeria. Other entities involved in the provision (e.g. municipalities, local governments) and main types of providers (e.g. public, private, mixed, community-based, etc.) include:
a) Private (Private Individuals, NGOs, the Civil Society including Religious Organizations b) Public (Federal Government, State and Local Governments) c) Local Communities.

In general, pre-primary facilities can be categorized as Early Child Development (ECD) centres and day care centres for children aged 0–3 years and pre-primary (nursery) schools for children 3–5 years. The privately-owned centres are run on a commercial, fee-paying basis. The fees charged usually depend on the quality of the teachers and facilities provided. However, the UBE Act (2004) integrated pre-school education into UBE Programme as an essential component, resulting in increased government ownership and participation in pre-school early child development. Every public primary school is now expected to also include a pre-primary/ECC centre which, like the primary school component, should be non-fee paying and service free.

The expanded scope of the UBE Programme to include a pre-primary linkage in every public primary school at state/Local Government Area (LGA) levels is a welcome development expected to boost enrolment, especially of girls in states with low girls' enrolment. Between 2004 and 2007, the national government has established Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) units in at least 111 primary schools in each of the 36 states of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja (UBEC, 2007).

3. Objectives and Aims on Early Childhood Education.
Under Nigeria's 1998 National Policy on Education, Early Childhood Education was tagged as pre-primary education and defined as "education given to children aged 3 to 5 plus years prior to their entering primary school". The policy document states the objectives of pre-primary education in the country and measures to ensure their achievement.

The purpose of Early Childhood/Pre-primary education as expounded in the National Policy on Education (4th Edition 2004):
- Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- Prepare the child for the primary level of education;
- Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices, etc.);
- Inculcate social norms;

- Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity; through the exploration of nature, and environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc.;
- Develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit;
- Learn good habits, especially good health habits; and
- Teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc. through play.

There are amount of factors that hinder this objectives, which include poor co-ordination between/ among education, health and social care leading to gaps in support, underperformances in the availability of childcare for children that need early assessment and intervention, there is also difficulties in appropriating funding to support early intervention, and where it exist there are too much bureaucracy. Ojameruaye (2010) reviewed that very little has been achieved so far to realize the objectives other than the 1991- 1995 and 1997-2001 Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN)/UNICEF Cooperative Agreement in basic education through which UNICEF provided assistance to some states for ECCE activities. Under the programme, about 2,045 low-cost ECCE centres were established in 12 states in Nigeria catering for only 174,748 children aged between 3 and 5 years out an estimated population of over 25 million children below the age of 6 years in the country. The programme is an example of best practice that needs to be replicated throughout the country. The centres are managed with NGOs and include education for children with lessons on health and education, nutrition and sanitation for their mothers.

Nevertheless, a remarkable success has been achieved in the ECCE programme in Nigeria. Part of this success was enhanced through the allocation of 5 per cent of Universal Basic Education (UBE) intervention funds from the Federal government to the states. These allocations are required to be harmonized by an equal amount from the states. Non-payment states are denied consequent allocations. Compliance is ensured through regular monitoring by the UBE commission and reports are sent to the Federal Executive Council through the coordinating Minister of Education.

4. Principles of Assessment

Assessment is the process of gathering information using various means and methods to systematically test the effectiveness of the child or the programmes used to teach the child. It is to determine if the students are learning or improving in the given or taught subject. According to The National Education Goals Panel (1998), the following general principles should guide both policies and practices for the assessment of young children.

• *Assessment should bring about benefits for children.*

Gathering accurate information from young children is difficult and potentially stressful. Formal assessments may also be costly and take resources that could otherwise be spent directly on programs and services for young children. To warrant conducting assessments, there must be a clear benefit—either in direct services to the child or in improved quality of educational programmes.

• *Assessments should be tailored to a specific purpose and should be reliable, valid, and fair for that purpose.*

Assessments designed for one purpose are not necessarily valid if used for other purposes. In the past, many of the abuses of testing with young children have occurred because of misuse. The recommendations in the sections that follow are tailored to specific assessment purposes.

• *Assessment policies should be designed recognizing that reliability and validity of assessments increase with children's age.*

The younger the child, the more difficult it is to obtain reliable and valid assessment data. It is particularly difficult to assess children's cognitive abilities accurately before age 6. Because of problems with reliability and validity, some types of assessment should be postponed until children are older, while other types of assessment can be pursued, but only with necessary safeguards.

• *Assessments should be age-appropriate in both content and the method of data collection.*

Assessments of young children should address the full range of early learning and development, including physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language development; and cognition and general knowledge. Methods of assessment should recognize that children need familiar contexts in order to be able to demonstrate their abilities. Abstract paper-and-pencil tasks may make it especially difficult for young children to show what they know.

• *Assessments should be linguistically appropriate, recognizing that to some extent all assessments are measures of language.*

Regardless of whether an assessment is intended to measure early reading skills, knowledge of colour, names, or learning potential, assessment results are easily confounded by language proficiency, especially for children who come from home backgrounds with limited exposure to English, for whom the assessment would essentially be an assessment of their English proficiency.

Each child's first- and second-language development should be taken into account when determining appropriate assessment methods and in interpreting the meaning of assessment results.

• *Parents should be a valued source of assessment information, as well as an audience for assessment results.*

Because of the unreliability of direct measures of young children, assessments should include multiple sources of evidence, especially reports from parents and teachers. Assessment results should be shared with parents as part of an ongoing process that involves parents in their child's education.

Purposeful and systematic assessment requires decisions about the domains to assess:
• physical well-being and motor development,
• social and emotional development,
• approaches to learning,
• language development (including emergent literacy), and

• cognition and general knowledge (including mathematics and science).

5. Areas to be Assessed in Children

Children exhibiting signs of developmental delay will benefit from professional, comprehensive assessment in some or all of the following areas as enumerated by Early Childhood Committee-Education (1999):

- *Background information about family, early development, health, language, literacy and educational experiences.*

   A record of early developmental milestones will provide information about rate of learning, and note should be made of the age at which parents or teachers first observed 'problems.'

- *Hearing and vision.*

   Some physiological causes affect developmental delays. For example, a hearing impairment can interfere with language acquisition; a child with a visual impairment may be unable to interpret and interact with his or her environment appropriately.

- *Perception, memory, language, thinking skills, and problem solving.*

   Assessment of these skills and aptitudes can assist in distinguishing between children delayed in all aspects of development and those slow in a few areas, who otherwise perform as well or better than their age peers.

- *Listening comprehension and expressive language.*

   Observation of the child as he or she communicates with parents, teachers and peers demonstrates his or her ability to comprehend single words, sentences, questions and short stories. A child should be able to use words previously learned, express ideas in an organized way, manipulate the sounds that make words, and play rhyming games, as appropriate. Constraints associated with formal testing may be less evident during observation, revealing more of what a child knows or can express. This is a significant area of observation because other symbolic systems, such as reading, writing, and mathematics are based largely on oral language.

- *Awareness and manipulation of sounds in words, letter names, and picture names.*

   These are good predictors of early reading.

- *Writing mechanics and early content.*

   A child's pencil grasp during the writing process, samples of drawings, invented spellings, and pretend messages can effectively supplement the results of more constrained formal testing.

- *Mathematics*

Testing instruments assess a child's verbal, visual and cognitive skills by his or her ability to recognize numerals and perceive quantitative and qualitative characteristics (more, less, bigger, similar, different). Additional informal observation is also valuable.

- *Reasoning*

    A child's ability to sort, group, classify objects and attributes, solve problems, and understand cause and effect can be determined by the performance of various tasks and by careful observation.

- *Social and self-help skills and use of non-verbal communication.*

    Children should demonstrate the ability, progressively, to put on items of clothing, tie shoes, button buttons, select clothes that are appropriate for different activities and weather conditions, and feed themselves. A child should learn to take turns, as play progresses from sensory exploration to a combination of exploration and representational play. Observing the child perform tasks that require careful observation and other visual-spatial skills can be beneficial.

- *Attention*

    Younger children may be expected to lack sustained attention and be overactive, while preschoolers should develop the ability to remain on-task for a sustained period. Observation can reveal problems in this area.

- *Maturation*

    Parents can provide information about a child's ability to care for him- or herself and for others. From this information, along with observation, a child's level of general independence can be determined.

Finally, periods of diagnostic testing should reveal a child's rate and style of learning and insight into beneficial forms of instruction by providing valuable data on his or her performance over time and across contexts.

6. Purposes of Assessment for Preschoolers

The intended use of an assessment, its purpose, determines every other aspect of how the assessment is conducted. Purpose determines the content of the assessment; what should be measured; methods of data collection. Should the procedures be standardized? Can data come from the child, the parent, or the teacher? What level of reliability and validity must be established? and, finally, the stakes or consequences of the assessment, which in turn determine the kinds of security necessary to protect against potential harm from frail assessment-based decisions. For example, if data from a state-wide assessment are going to be used for school accountability, then it is important that data be collected in a standardized way to ensure comparability of school results (Tauber, 1999).

If children in some schools are given practice ahead of time so that they will be familiar with the task formats, then children in all schools should be provided with the same practice; teachers should not give help during the assessment or restate the questions unless it is part

of the standard administration to do so; and all of the assessments should be administered in approximately the same week of the school year. In contrast, when a teacher is working with an individual child in a classroom trying to help the child learns, assessments almost always occur in the context of activities and tasks that are already familiar, so practice or task familiarity is not an issue. In the classroom context, teachers may well provide help while assessing to take advantage of the learning opportunity and to figure out exactly how a child is thinking by seeing what kind of help makes it possible to take the next steps. For teaching and learning purposes, the timing of assessments makes the most sense if they occur on an ongoing basis as particular skills and content are being learned. Good classroom assessment is arranged, not disorganized, and, with training, teachers' expectations can reflect common standards. Nonetheless, assessments devised by teachers as part of the learning process lack the uniformity and the standardization that is necessary to ensure comparability, essential for accountability purposes. Similarly, the technical standards for reliability and validity are much more rigorous for high-stakes accountability assessment than for informal assessments used by individual caregivers and teachers to help children learn.

The consequences of accountability assessments are much greater, so the instruments used must be sufficiently accurate to ensure that important decisions about a child are not made as the result of measurement error. In addition, accountability assessments are usually "one-shot," stand-alone events. In contrast, caregivers and teachers are constantly collecting information over long periods of time and do not make high-stakes decisions. If they are wrong one day about what a child knows or is able to do, then the error is easily remedied the next day.

Serious misuses of testing with young children occur when assessments intended for one purpose are used inappropriately for other purposes. For example, the content of Intelligent Quotient (IQ) measures intended to identify children for special education is not appropriate content to use in planning instruction. At the same time, assessments designed for instructional planning may not have sufficient validity and technical accuracy to support high-stakes decisions such as placing children in a special preschool designated for at-risk children. An appropriate assessment system may include different assessments for different categories of purpose, such as:

• assessments to support learning;
• assessments for identification of special needs;
• assessments for program evaluation and monitoring trends, and
• assessments for high-stakes accountability.

7. Organization Structures of Early Childhood Classroom
Physical Structure

In order to effectively facilitate social interaction, the early childhood classroom, particularly in classes one through four, should be organized to ensure the ease of group work. By organizing student desks in small groups and allowing enough physical space between the groupings to maintain freedom of movement, the physical structure of the classroom becomes truly defined through progressivism. Additionally, this particular

arrangement decreases the overall density of the classroom, presumably lowering student both student aggression as well as anxiety levels (McLeod, Fisher & Hoover, 2003).

Though the traditional elementary classroom is decorated in harsh, primary colours, such decoration is strident to the eye and has been cited as increasing hyperactivity in young children (Oppenheimer 2006). Thus, the optimum classroom environment is defined through muted colours, and, if possible, muted lighting. Most teachers have long recognized that simply turning off the harsh fluorescent overheads calms students, assuming natural light is available through the presence of windows.

Daily Rhythms
Perhaps even more essential to creating a safe, familiar learning environment is the continuous assertion of regular rhythms. Particularly in young learners, the ongoing presence of unanticipated events has been proven to increase stress levels, which act to inhibit learning (Oppenheimer 2006). By posting a simple version of the schedule and keeping it regular in terms of which subjects will be taught, early childhood educators can establish an optimum environment in which learning can take place, unobstructed by anxiety or stress.

Daily Activities
In addition to daily group work and hands-on experiments to facilitate learning of traditional subjects, the early childhood educator needs to ensure that a certain level of physical activity be allowed throughout the day. As recess has become largely and unfortunately a thing of the past in most public schools, teachers may need to think creatively to allow physical activity within the confines of their classrooms. Simply by allowing students the opportunity to stand throughout their day or sit in a pre-designated floor space, teachers can hope to alleviate some of the excess anxiety that builds as a result of rigid desk-posture. Additionally, other daily experiences should include the opportunity to be creative whenever possible, conveying learning through pictures, journals, or performances as is suitable and temporally possible.

8. Recommendations/ Conclusions

Early childhood assessment is very crucial area to explore especially if the goals of Universal Basic Education and EEC must be achieved. Therefore, all stakeholders and professionals involved in the total assessment of a child should consider the following:

- make ethical, appropriate, valid, and reliable assessment a vital part of all early childhood programmes.
- to assess young children's strengths, progress, and needs, use assessment methods that are developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children's daily activities, supported by professional development, inclusive of parents, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes.
- making sound decisions about teaching and learning;
- identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and

- helping programs improve their educational and developmental interventions.

It is also suggested and recommended by Early Childhood Connections for Infants, Toddlers and Families (2002) that the best practices in Early Intervention Assessment should consider the following:

- build an alliance with the parent/caregiver and discuss issues and concerns of the family.
- obtain developmental history and current family experience.
- observe the child in the context of spontaneous play with parents and/or familiar caregivers.
- conduct specific assessments of child functioning, as needed.
- use a developmental model as a framework to integrate all of the data to create picture of the whole child.
- convey evaluation findings in the context of an alliance with families.

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