

Practices and Challenges of Children's Learning Assessment in Pre-school Centers

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Abstract

The purpose this study was to investigate practices and challenges assessing children in pre-school centers. In the study, 66 teachers participated from government and non-government pre-school centers. To collect data, questionnaire, interview and observation guide were used. The quantitative data was analyzed through frequency, percentage, and mean and the qualitative data was analyzed thematically. Findings show that educators hold diverse views and have varying approaches to assessment, using different tools and methods. All participants agree that assessment is important for supporting children's learning and development. The findings revealed that poor curriculum implementation and instruction, unfair assessment practices such as unhealthy comparison among children, labelling children as failures by emphasizing on norm, using paper-pencil tests, focusing on few domains of children's development, using the assessment result for promotion, and a possible wrong interpretation of assessment results. Moreover, poor documentation of learning activities of the children, using few assessment tools throughout the semester and summative assessment approaches, poor parent communication and feedback provision were common problems in the majority of preschool centres. Lack of professional staff, lack of ECCE syllabus, large class size, and lack of knowledge and skill were the major challenges.

Keywords: Assessment Practice; Challenges; Children assessment; Pre-school

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment of young children must be very different than that of older students. Young children are learning how to communicate and are able to show what they know by doing, rather than by taking a pencil-and-paper test. They have not yet mastered the skills of reading and writing. Assessment of young children needs to include developmentally appropriate activities. It should not include a multiple-choice test, or other formal assessments. It should include assessing the child in natural settings doing the day-to-day activities they normally do (Kulieke, et al, 1990 cited in Marra, 2004).

Assessment, which is an integral part of the curriculum (Dunphy, 2008), can be regarded as a vehicle to facilitate the process of learning and development inside Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings. The perception of assessment in ECE has moved beyond that of screening and diagnosis, and now encompasses answering questions about the child or providing information about classrooms and programs (Snow & Van Hemel, 2008). As a result, the information obtained from assessments is not only a manifestation of the child's skills and potentials, but also the adequacy of the settings they are embedded within.

Early childhood professionals use a range of assessment tools to identify children's interactions, conversations, ideas and expressions in order to better understand each child's strengths, abilities and interests (Seefeldt & Galper, 1998). Early childhood assessment needs to accurately portray the learning that is taking place in early childhood classrooms. It needs to be developmentally appropriate utilizing a variety of methods such as checklists, anecdotal records, and work samples. Assessment needs to include communication with parents and caretakers in order to reflect more accurately each child's development. Assessment needs to be used to plan future lessons and evaluate curriculum (Marra, 2004).

Assessment should occur in a natural setting whenever possible. This allows students to behave naturally, without anxiety. In a classroom setting this may be accomplished through the use of anecdotal records taken regularly by caretakers. The records should include the date and the action observed, as well as any other necessary comments. In this way, student growth is recorded accurately. Checklists can also be used to record child development. There are many lists of child development benchmarks that can be made into checklists for students. A list should be made for each student. Caretakers can then enter a date when they have observed the student meeting the benchmark (Marrat, 2004). The primary purpose of assessment is providing adults with the information they need to plan more appropriately for children's on-going development and should involve strategies that support rather than threaten children's feelings of self-esteem (Amponasah, 2004).

According to the Ethiopian ECCE Guideline and preschool syllabus, assessment of children should be holistic, focusing on all the aspects of their development. Furthermore, it should be continuous, using appropriate methods, and should not be used as a basis for promotion, retention or selection which means it must not be used to label the child. In addition, assessment results must be appropriately communicated to parents and it should indicate the child's strengths and weaknesses as well as make recommendations for improvement (MOE, 2010).

The Ethiopian curriculum planners and the entire MoE appear to have agreed on the essential role of teachers in curriculum implementation and the very informal nature of assessment in Ethiopian kindergartens. However, how many times do, teachers, as the implementers of the curriculum, reflect on the assessment carried out on children's performance? How could it be that make a very well informed decision that provides for every child in classrooms irrespective of the varying special needs? How can we assess the performance of an armless child who cannot write owing to such a physical challenge in Ethiopian pre-school context? and etc. Many issues can be raised related to assessment practices in pre-school centres. Hence, as a drop of water in the ocean and filling the knowledge gap in the area, the study addressed the following research questions: i) How do teachers practice child assessment in pre-school classrooms? ii) How far is the ECCE curriculum available in pre-school centres? iii) What are the challenges of assessing pre-school children?

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

Both qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed) design were used in the study. Mixed methods research is a research design (methodology) in which the researcher collects, analyzes, and integrates both quantitative and qualitative data in a study.

Participants

In the study, 12 pre-school centres found in Jijjiga were selected from all sectors (private, government, and faith based) through stratified sampling. Then 60 pre-school teachers were selected through simple random sampling. Moreover, six preschool teachers were selected through purposive sampling. In order to observe the classroom environment and availability of necessary ECCE related documents, 12 pre-school classrooms were selected from all government, private and faith-based pre-school centres.

Instruments

Based on the literature reviewed, the researchers prepared items consisting of 17 items under four dimensions: Teachers assessment practice (4 items); Feedback provision and communication (3 items); Facilitating children's development through assessment (8 items); Program assessment (9 items). Each of which was evaluated by a four-point Likert-type scale: (1) Not applicable (2) Not met (3) Partially met (4) Fully met. Observation checklist in 'Yes' or 'No' format was also used in the study. It consists of 9 items focusing on availability of ECCE curriculum, recorded documents of each student, lesson plans, communication books, and etc. Moreover, to dig out detailed information about their assessment practices, 12 interview guide questions were prepared for pre-school teachers.

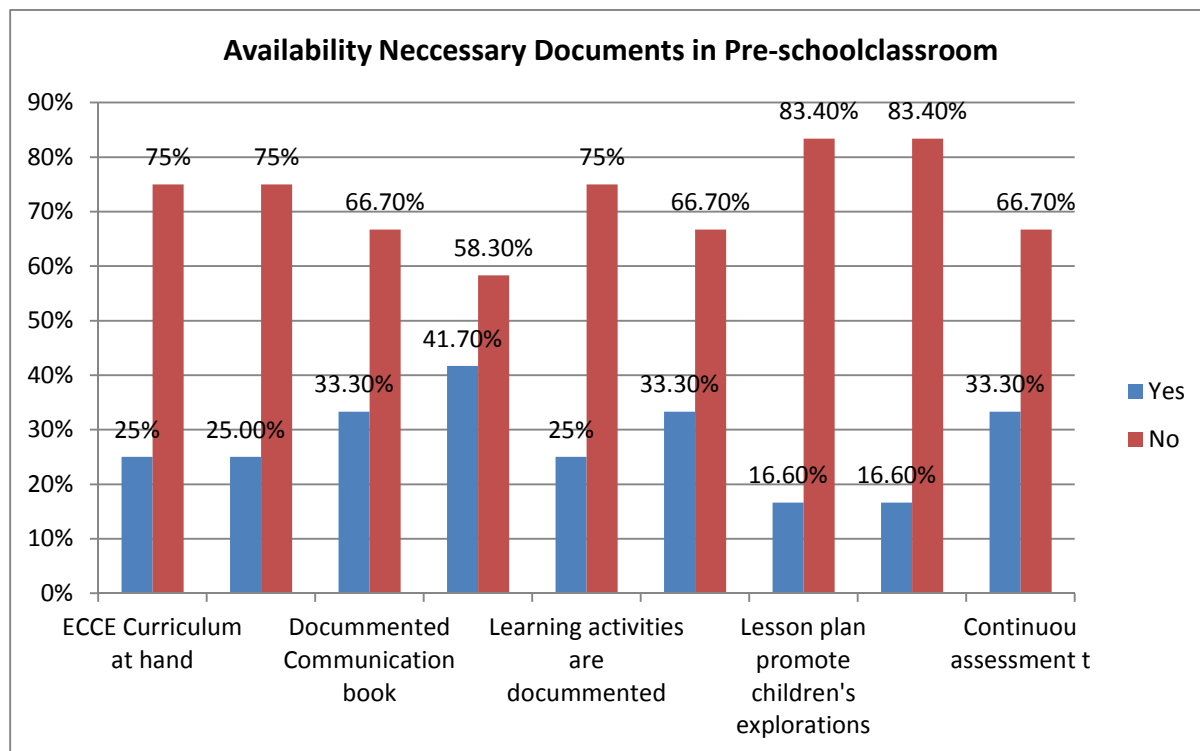
Data Analysis

The goal of data analysis is to describe accurately what happened in the data. Once the data collection process is completed, the data was cleaned prior data analysis. Then, the quantitative data was analyzed through percentage and mean. In addition, qualitative data was analyzed thematically.

RESULTS

Availability of Relevant ECCE Related Documents

Regarding ECCE documents, results of the observation guide revealed (as shown in the chart below) that the majority (75%) of observed pre-school centres do not have copies of the preschool curriculum and syllabus (83%) at hand. With regard to children's progress report, only 25% of preschool centres had documented record. When we look at documented commentaries, 67% of the observed preschool centres had no communication book and moreover 58% of them did not communicate the assessment result with parents. And children's learning activities were not documented well. In relation to the lesson plan, in the majority of preschool centres, teachers lesson plan did not incorporate the three domains of development, and activities that promote children's exploration. Furthermore, teachers' assessment techniques were not continuous and fail to address all aspects of development. Although an interviewee from a private owned pre-school centre mention "*my lesson plan and activities touch all domains of development like cognitive, affective and psychomotor*", the researchers observed that her lesson plan incorporated only the cognitive aspects of development mainly focusing on acquisition of basic skills of language and numeracy.



Assessment Practice in Pre-school

Pre-school teachers' assessment techniques and approaches were measured through questionnaire with four-point scale: Not applicable (1), Not Met (2), Partially Met (3) and Fully Met (4). The mean value of assessment method was found 1.53 (SD=0.53) and the lowest mean score in this domain was found from teachers' use of assessment information to provide specific intervention (see Table 1). The percent distribution of assessment practice shown that, 63% of teachers observe children's learning and development, and documented. Furthermore, implementing different continuous assessment techniques to measure students progress was met partially in half (55%) of observed preschool centres. But in the remaining 45% of preschool centres, the practice of using anecdotal record, and portfolio was unknown. Supporting this, an interviewee said "*Academic achievement of preschool students is well recorded in roster by the head teacher. However other types of child activities like play, gross motor activities, fine-motor activities, child's social interaction and other activities have no formal records at school.*"

Table 1. Assessment Practice in Pre-schools

No	Items	NA		Not Met		Partially Met		Fully Met		Mean
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
1	Document children's progress	3	4.5%	13	22%	37	63%	7	11%	1.807
2	Use observations data to provide specific intervention	27	45%	18	30%	11	18%	4	6.8%	0.864
3	Use different tools and strategies that are continuous	7	10%	11	18%	32	55%	10	16%	1.875
4	Use specific assessment practice	5	8%	27	45%	17	18%	11	18%	1.568
Grand mean										1.528

Concerning the purpose of assessment almost all interviewees use the assessment result to determine students progression from grade to grade. Supporting this, an interviewee said "*The major purpose of my assessment is to know or classify clever and better doing students from the dull or lower performers. I assess them through either mid or final exams.*"

Practices of Feedback Provision and Communication of Assessment Result

In relation with assessment reporting, the cumulative mean value of the practice was found 1.39 (SD=0.73) which was below the expected mean value (see Table 2). 63% of preschool teachers were not using progress card and other developmental checklist to report children's progress. The practice of maintaining portfolio of all children was not implemented in 65% of preschool centres. Similarly, 64% of respondents did not use different methods to communicate children's progress with their parents.

Table 2. Percentage and Frequency Distribution of Children's Assessment Result Provision Practices

No	Items	NA		Not Met		Partially Met		Fully Met		Mean
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
1	Progress cards and developmental checklists.	5	8%	37	63%	18	29%			1.23
2	Maintain portfolios of all children	4	6.8%	39	65%	15	25%	2	3.4%	1.25
3	Combination of methods to communicate children's progress with their parents.	1	2.3%	18	30%	38	63.6%	3	4.5%	1.71
Grand mean										1.39

Concerning communication of children's result the qualitative data shown poor feedback provision practices to parents about their child's progress. An interviewee mentioned,

"I share the academic achievement of children to their parents at the end of the semester or at the end of the academic year.

The interviewee further noted,

"Sometimes I call and contact parents of children with behavioural problems."

Contrary ideas were also raised by an interviewee from a private pre-school centre who stated,

"I communicate if the homework is not done well or if the children's academic result, activities, and behaviours are not good. Moreover, when the child demonstrates negligence in taking care of educational materials like the exercise books, pens, school bag etc. I also communicate parents when the child demonstrates a very good performance, to encourage the parents for further support in building their children's achievement."

Practices of Facilitating Children's Development through Assessment

Regarding the practices of facilitating children's development through assessment, Table 3 below show that the cumulative mean values was 1.71 (SD= 0.67) and which was above the expected mean value. The highest mean value (2.59) and the lowest mean value (1.20) for teachers' mode of assessment to meet parents' expectation and conduct periodic observation of children respectively. Table 3 also show that the practice of periodic observation to make decisions about children was not met in 61% of preschool centres. In 52% of preschool centres, teachers did not plan activities based on the performance of level of children. The majority (78%) of teachers' assessment techniques were just to meet the expectations of school leader. On the other hand, the practice of assessing students' progress based on the curriculum or syllabus was not found in 62% of preschool centres.

Table 3. Practices of Facilitating Children's Development through Assessment

No	Items	NA		Not Met		Partially Met		Fully Met		Mean
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
1	Conducts periodic observations of children	8	9.09%	54	61.4%	26	29.5%			1.20
2	Plan activities based on the performance level of children	9	10.2%	46	52.3%	27	30.7%	6	6.82%	1.34
3	Assessment just to meet the expectations of school.	2	2.27%	13	14.8%	69	78.4%	4	4.55%	1.85
4	Assessment to depend on the syllabus.	2	2.27%	55	62.5%	27	30.7%	4	4.55%	1.37
5	Assessment just to meet parents' expectations.			3	3.41%	30	34.1%	55	62.5%	2.59
6	Assessment that reflects teacher's teaching philosophy.	25	28.4%	5	5.68%	12	13.6%	46	52.3%	1.89
Grand mean										1.71

Staff meeting and Parental feedback

Regarding program assessment (i.e. staff meeting, and parental feedback), Table 4 below shown that, the cumulative mean value (mean=1.82) was slightly higher than the expected mean value. Table 4 also revealed that the practice of sharing strength and weakness of the children with parents was particularly met in 62% of preschool centres, and the practice of annual review of the program was partially met.

Table 4. Percentage and Frequency Distributions of Program Assessment

No	Items	NA		Not Met		Partially Met		Fully Met		Mean
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
1	Share strengths of the children with parents.			33	55%	20	34%	7	11%	1.77
2	Annual review of programme			15	25%	37	62%	8	13%	1.87
Grand mean										1.84

Challenges of Assessing Pre-school Children

In describing the challenges of assessing children in preschool classroom, teachers raised many related issues such as large number of students per classroom and shortage of time to conduct other types of assessment techniques, lack of knowledge and skill about assessment in preschool education, low parental involvement and unresponsiveness to their children's education. Concerning this, an interviewee from government pre-school centre expressed her testament.

“Large numbers of students are found in my class. I handle all the activities without an assistant. So, it is challenging to me to have time for all students. It takes too much time to prepare portfolios and write their progress on it.”

Another interviewee from a private pre-school said that,

“In this school, teachers do not take any training related to assessment of pre-school children. Through experience we know how to assess our children but training was not offered for us. In my point of view to understand children's progress informal assessment (observation) is better. Because, pre-school teachers get to know children well by observing them in action.”

CONCLUSIONS

Curriculum and assessment should be based on knowledge of theories of learning and child development with attention given to children's needs and interests. The findings revealed that poor curriculum implementation and instruction, unfair assessment practices such as unhealthy comparison among children, labelling children as failures by emphasizing on norm, focusing few domains of children's development, using the assessment result for promotion, and wrong interpretation of assessment results were common in most pre-schools. Moreover, poor documentation of learning activities of the children, using few assessment tools throughout the semester and summative assessment approaches were common problems in the majority of preschool centres.

Many scientific researches shown that assessment can be used to facilitating children's development. Lack of periodic observation of children's progress, lack of ECCE syllabus while developing the assessment tools, ignoring the performance level of children during instructional planning were also observed in most pre-school centres. Further more in many of pre-school centres pre-school teachers/caregivers did not share strengths of the children with parents and identify areas of improvement on a regular basis. Program review is very important to know how it can be improved for better learning outcomes of children. However, annual review of program was not done in most of pre-school centres.

The implication for this situation is that the teachers were not following emerging theories and the national ECCE curriculum principles governing childhood assessment practices in line with developmentally appropriate practices. This possible effect is that it will result in misappropriation of assessment on these children and as such it will result in poor curriculum implementation and alignment in the pre-schools.

In the national syllabus and other documents it is clearly illustrated in pre-school teachers' use of assessment tools that note children's developmental achievements and milestones, undertaking the responsibility of bringing children to 'the next step' of development, and their concern for children who manifest a serious gap with their expected skills. At the same time, educators also took into account each child's distinctive characteristics, building assessment practice from 'where the child is at,' his or her capabilities and current understanding (Dunphy, 2008).

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