

Analysis of the Pre-Primary School Children Assessment Procedure in Nigeria

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Abstract

The issue of assessment is critical to children's development. The adoption of suitable assessment tools/strategies would aid the process of judgment and decision making on children's developmental milestones and learning. Therefore, this study examined the assessment procedure adopted for the pre-primary school children in Nigeria and to determine their developmental appropriateness to children. A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. One hundred and sixty-two public schools were purposively selected from two southwestern states in Nigeria based on the availability of pre-primary class(es). One instrument entitled 'Assessment Procedure Checklists (APC)' was used for data collection. The instrument has two sections with section A, focusing on the demographic variables of the number of early childhood education classes available, number of teachers, number of children and teachers' qualification. Section B assessed the type(s) of the assessment tool(s)/strategies adopted, when and how the procedure was carried out. Data were analyzed using simple percentages. Results indicated that the assessment procedure for pre-primary children in public schools was not developmentally appropriate for the children as paper and pencil's type is the prominent one. It is therefore recommended that teachers should be given training and retraining on assessment procedures that are developmentally appropriate and would help to make decisions on children.

Keywords: assessment, procedure, pre-primary children, Nigeria

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Introduction

Early childhood education is part of the scope of Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria towards achieving international agenda of Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) initiatives. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2002) explains that basic education refers to early childhood and pre-primary education, primary and to junior secondary education. The implication as emphasized by UNESCO is that pre-primary education is the bedrock of other levels of basic education for every child within this age cohort. Early childhood educators, therefore, advocate holistic approaches to early childhood education, the type that deemphasizes the milestone of academic development only. It is the type that focuses on all the developmental domains of the physical, emotional, and psycho-social well-being of a child (Ajayi, 2015, 2017; UNESCO, 2002). The essence is to help children develop adequately through appropriate decisions that cut across all the domains of their development. Therefore, a vital aspect of basic education that has not really received attention in Nigeria and needs to be considered is the issue of assessment at the pre-primary level. The overarching questions are:

How are children assessed in the education sector?

Is the assessment the type that would enhance appropriate decision-making on the children?

Assessment in early childhood is a crucial issue in order to help children develop adequately. Assessment has been defined as the process of gathering ongoing and comprehensive information about specific aspects of a child's knowledge, behavior, skill level or personality for the purpose of making evaluative decisions (Meisels, Bickel, Nicholson, Xue, & Atkins-Burnett, 2001). Fuhua Primary School (2012) and Vacc and Ritter (1995) stated that assessment ought to be an ongoing gathering of information about the children on different facets of development as well as from various sources, providing qualitative and quantitative feedbacks that will support and guide the child's development. Its practices should, therefore, focus beyond summative evaluation, that is, end of term/session or end of programme assessment if adequate information about the child will be given. From the definitions, assessment of children is expected to be ongoing and not a

“one-shot” procedure. It is also to be holistic; that is, information should be gathered on every aspect of the child’s development. This process will aid to make appropriate and accurate decision about the child.

Assessment is differentiated from evaluation by the scholars’ definitions. While assessment is a process of documenting knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs of a child in measurable terms, evaluation is making a judgment on a child based on criteria and evidence. It means that assessment focuses on the process rather than the product which evaluation stands for. By this, Resources for Learning (2014) explained that the main purpose of assessment is to provide educators, parents, and families with critical information about a child’s development and growth. The information has to cover all areas of development by:

- Providing a record of growth in all developmental areas: cognitive, physical/motor, language, social-emotional, and approaches to learning.
- Identifying children who may need additional support and determine if there is a need for intervention or support services.
- Helping educators plan individualized instruction for a child or for a group of children that are at the same stage of development.
- Identifying the strengths and weaknesses within a program and information on how well the program meets the goals and needs of the children.
- Providing a common ground between educators and parents or families to use in collaborating on a strategy to support their child.

The implication of these is that when assessment covers all issues and areas of a child in every settings or situation that will portray the reality about the child, thereby, enhancing the adequate development of the child. Hence, the assessment should not focus on one aspect of development such as cognitive development in order to make it beneficial to children. Niemeyer (as cited in Vacc & Ritter, 1995) stated that assessment at the preschool level should be based on multiple theoretical perspectives because, for the evaluation of the child to be holistic and support the child, it should be based on the integration of tests of cognitive ability with other measures of motor and social skills. Therefore, it is concluded that assessments should focus less on testing (McLachlan, 2017). Ward (2018) also decried the idea of reducing the assessment to standardized testing indicating that it is more

detrimental to learners' success. Meisels (1993) and Stevens and DeBord (2001) had earlier stated that testing generally fails on the criteria of developmentally appropriate for children under the age of eight and these can change children's perceptions about themselves and about their educational experiences. Test scores would only disclose more about a child's test-taking skills than his or her knowledge while group administered tests would focus on the children's acquisition of simple facts, low-level skills, superficial memorization, and isolated evidence of achievement. It is, therefore, emphasized that the negative effect over time outweighs the positive benefits.

In the light of this, there are various means of assessing children that are considered developmentally appropriate for children and they have been categorized into informal and formal. The informal, which is also an indirect or authentic assessment, has to do with conducting natural observations, collecting data and children's work for portfolios as well as using educator and teacher ratings. Formal may use standardized testing and/or questionnaire (Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2018; Resources for Learning, 2014). Paper-and-pencil tests (in form of weekly/periodic continuous assessment tests, termly/annual examination) are an example of standardized testing which has been identified as the prominent assessment procedure from primary to other higher educational level. This type of assessment procedure is mainly used to assess the cognitive aspect of the child's development leaving the other developmental aspects. It gives room for competition among learners and may not be a true test of individual learners' ability. Stevens and DeBord (2001) stressed that research with children under the age of eight years has shown that using standardized tests for their grade placement or school retention can prove to be harmful to children's ultimate achievements. It has to be emphasized that all the aspects of development are inter-connected; hence, the assessment of the child should take cognizance of the inter-connectivity.

Using various techniques would help to make adequate and unbiased decisions about children. Examples of assessment tools that may be used in gathering information about children are as follows: anecdotal records, portfolio, checklists, running records, work/time/event sampling, rating scales, rubrics, interview, observation, and so on. They help to give explicit information that clearly guides in understanding and monitoring a child's progress or otherwise. The way the information gathered is scored or graded in

describing the child's developmental progress may also make or mar a child. It is, therefore, important that the scoring/grading procedure be developmentally appropriate in order to fulfill the purpose of the assessment. According to Adam (as cited in Anderson & Walvoord, 1998), grading is:

the process by which a teacher assesses student learning through classroom tests and assignments, the context in which good teachers establish that process and the dialogue that surrounds grades and defines their meaning to various audiences (p. 2).

In other words, grading is written by the teacher based on the performance of the learners in various learning activities. Reeves (2015) referred to it as a form of feedback on learners' performance. However, it should enhance learners' performance and development and not be detrimental to them in any form.

Observation has shown that how pre-primary school children are assessed in Nigerian schools may not be classified as holistic or developmentally appropriate in nature. Studies have so far concentrated on assessment of learners at secondary school levels (Afemikhe & Omo-Egbekuse, n.d.; Idowu & Esere, 2009) while little or no attention has been given to assessment issue at the pre-primary level in Nigeria. This study is important in that establishing and ascertaining that quality early childhood education services are given to children are best determined through holistic assessment of children where various techniques are adopted to assess children in all areas and competencies. Hence, this study set at examining the assessment procedure of the children in the government schools. It is in the light of this view that this study is embarked upon guided by four specific objectives as follows:

- 1) examine the assessment tool(s) adopted in public pre-primary schools in Nigeria
- 2) assess the developmental areas covered in the assessment of children
- 3) examine the frequency of the assessment procedure carried out on children
- 4) assess the scoring or grading procedure for children's performance.

Method

The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. One hundred and sixty-two

public schools were selected from the two southwestern states of Nigeria using purposive sampling technique based on the availability of pre-primary class(es) in the study area. Teachers of the preschool classes were the participants. One instrument titled ‘Assessment Procedure Checklists (APC)’ was used for data collection. The instrument has two sections with Section A, focusing on the demographic variables of the number of early childhood education classes available, number of teachers, and the number of children. Section B of the instrument focused on the type(s) of the assessment tool(s)/strategies adopted by teachers to gather information about the children.

Table 1. *Frequency Distribution of the Demographic Data of Sampled Schools*

| No of Schools Observed (162) | No of Preschool Classes in the Observed Schools | Class Size | Teachers-pupil Ratio | Age Range of Children | Teachers’ Qualifications |
|------------------------------|---|------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| 92 | 2 (56.8) | 40-60 (Very Large) | 2 | 3-5 | National Certificate in Education (NCE) & Bachelor of Education(B. Ed.) |
| 45 | 2 (27.7) | 30-39 (Large) | 2 | Yrs. | |
| 15 | 1 (9.25) | 20 -24 (Normal) | 1 | | |
| 10 | 1 (6.17) | 8-20 (Small) | 1 | | |

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the observed schools and 162 public primary schools were observed. There were variations in the class size. 92 schools (56.8%) had a very large class size ranging from 40-60, 45 (27.7%) had 30-39 children in the class which may still be classified as a large class size based on National Minimum Standards for Early Child Care Centers (Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council [NERDC], 2007) and National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2014). It was only in 15 (9.25%) and 10 (6.17%) that the class sizes were either normal or small, having the ranges of 20 and 24 or 8 and 20. In the very large and large classes, two teachers were handling the children while one teacher handled other classes. The age range of children in the classrooms was 3-5 years old. The teachers in this arm of the primary schools were holders of Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) and the Bachelor of

Education (B. Ed.).

The instrument also examined the frequency (how often) of assessing the children, the procedure of carrying out the assessment, and the reporting process. The scoring procedure for the instrument was Yes/No dichotomy. The items in the instrument were prepared based on literature review on assessment that is developmentally appropriate to children's learning. The content validity of the instrument was determined by tests and measurement specialists before its administration. Data collected were analyzed using simple percentages and bar charts.

Results

Results were presented in line with the specific objectives set for the study.

Types of Assessment Tool(s) Adopted in Public Pre-primary Schools in Nigeria

Table 2. *Percentage Distribution of Types of Assessment Tools Adopted in Public Pre-primary Schools*

| S/N | Type of Assessment Tools | Adopted | Not Adopted |
|-----|--|------------|-------------|
| 1 | Paper and Pencil Tests (Continuous Assessment Tests, Termly/Annual Examination) Form | 162(100%) | - |
| 2 | Report Cards/ Grades | 162(100%) | - |
| 3 | Anecdotal Records | - | - |
| 4 | Checklists | - | - |
| 5 | Portfolio | - | - |
| 6 | Running Records | - | - |
| 7 | Time Sampling | - | - |
| 8 | Event Sampling | - | - |
| 9 | Rating Scales | 144(88.8%) | 18(11.2%) |
| 10 | Rubrics | - | - |
| 11 | Interview | 162(100%) | - |

Table 2 shows that all the observed schools 162 (100%) and teachers adopted paper-and-pencil tests (Continuous Assessment Tests and Termly/Annual Examination) to assess the children in the content areas such as numeracy and literacy, so also adopted interview as the

mode of assessing pre-primary school children during an examination. Report cards/grades were used as a means of recording children’s performance with Letter Rating Scale as a tool was indicated as part of the report cards of the 144 (88.8%) observed. Other assessment tools such as anecdotal records and running records were not adopted in any of the schools observed.

The Developmental Areas Covered in the Assessment of Children

Figure 1 shows that 85 (52.4%) gave consideration to the physical developmental area of the children in terms of height and weight alone. All the schools 162 (100%) focused on the cognitive ability of the children. One hundred and forty-one (87.0%) considered the affective/social domain while 21 (12.96%) did not bother about the area. On the psychomotor domain, 137 (84.6%) focused on it in form of drawing, but 25 (15.4%) did not.

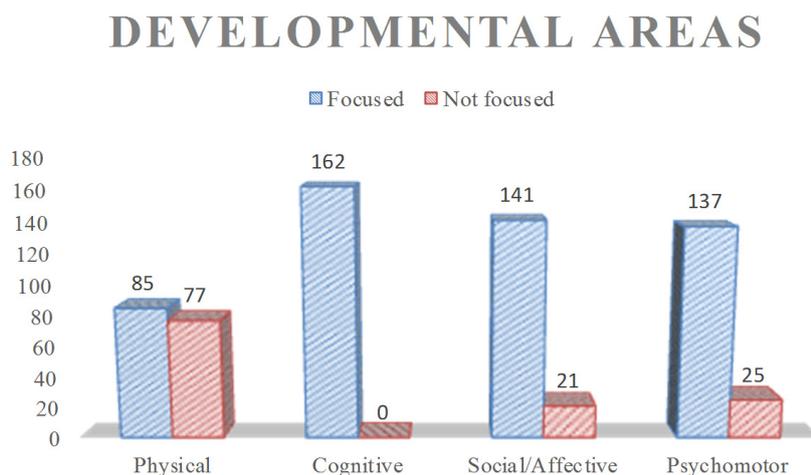


Figure 1. Bar Chart Showing Developmental Areas Focused in Children Assessment

The Frequency of the Assessment Procedure Carried Out on Children

Figure 2 reveals that all the observed schools did not assess children once per term. 52 (32.1%) indicated that the assessment is carried out two times per term (mid-term

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assessment and terminal examination), but 110 (67.9%) did not adopt that procedure. Forty-seven which amount to 29% assessed three times in a term (2 continuous assessment and one terminal examination), but 63 (38.8%) did not. Some schools 59 (36.4%) assessed four times and 4 (2.5%) indicated that the assessment is weekly carried out while no school involved in daily assessment of the children.

FREQUENCY OF ASSESSMENT

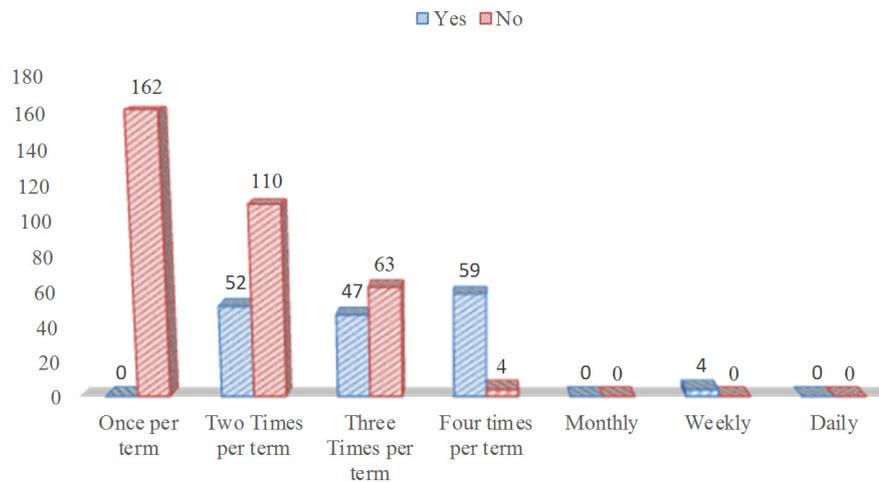


Figure 2. Bar Chart Showing the Frequency of Assessment in Schools

The Scoring or Grading Procedure for the Assessment of Children's Performance

The marks indicated implies the mark obtained by the learners versus mark obtainable, which is the total mark. If the learner scores 25 out of 50 marks, it would be recorded as 25/50 or 60/100 depending on the yardstick used. The rating procedure indicates the use of alphabets (e.g., A, B, C or Good, Fair, Poor, etc.) to rate learners' performance. In analytic procedure/developmental procedure/holistic procedure, the child's performance is clearly described; the child can write 1-10; the child can write A-M, etc.

SCORING OF ASSESSMENT

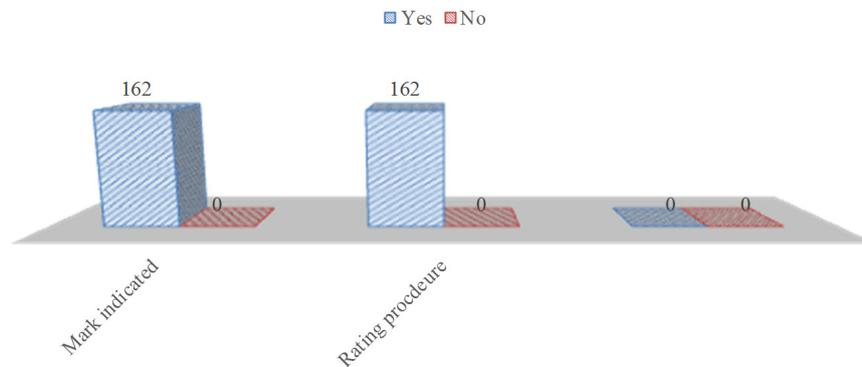


Figure 3. Bar Chart Showing the Scoring of Children's Performance

Figure 3 shows the scoring procedure adopted in the schools observed in reporting children's performance. All the schools 162 (100%) adopted marks obtainable versus obtained procedure. This means that children's performance is presented in numerical values (25/50 or 60/100) as well as rating scaling in form of the use of the alphabet (A, B, C) or Good, Average, Fair, and Poor. Other forms of scoring that are descriptive or explanatory in nature were not adopted in any of the schools observed except in the overall comments of class teachers and school administrators, for instance, would write statements such as "Good performance, keep it up," "You can do better than this," "Poor results," and the like.

Discussion

The results showed the class size of the educational arm in the observed schools. Some schools have a very large class size which is in contrast to what is stipulated in the National Minimum Standard for Early Child Care Centers in Nigeria (NERDC, 2007) and National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) as 25 pupils per class. The numbers of teachers to handle the very large and large classes are in adequate. This is in line with the findings of

Gbadegesin, Jegede, and Ajayi (2014) who established it as a variable resulting in occupational stress. The age range of children, 3-5 years, is in line with the policy statement. The teachers though had the benchmark certificate of personnel for primary school level, which is NCE. Many of them were actually qualified to handle the level because the majority of them are NCE or Bachelor of Education with specialization in various content areas and not Early Childhood Education (Pre-primary or Nursery Education). This finding is not in accordance with the policy statement that provision would be made in teacher education for specialization in early childhood education (FRN, 2004, 2014).

Furthermore, the finding showed that paper-and-pencil tests, in which children were asked to write answers to questions, and interview were the main modes of assessing children at the pre-primary level in the public primary schools and report cards with grades specified was the means of reporting children's performance. This is contrary to the latest education research which pointed out that report cards do not do much good as they do not communicate appropriately to parents about the developmental status of young children (Field, as cited in Jerson, 2013). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (as cited in Guddemi & Case, 2004) also indicated that the excessive use of this type of assessment is inappropriate and cannot fulfill the purposes of assessment for young children. The finding also revealed that the most focused developmental area in children's assessment is the cognitive ability. Bietz (2012) indicated that the report cards at this level should not resemble the traditional report cards for older children, but when it is used, it should chart the progress in all developmental areas and should be paired with other assessment tools such as anecdotal records or portfolios so as to give a clear-cut picture of the child's progress to the parents. The implication is that other developmental aspects of the children were not given adequate attention, and then, the true picture of the children's skills, ability, and personality are not being explored to make concrete and high-quality decisions that would benefit the children and their families as well as the viability of the programme. As a result, UNESCO (2002) called for deemphasizing the milestone of academic development of children to the complete physical, emotional, and psycho-social well-being of a child in order to establish the holistic assessment of the child. There is variation in the time children were assessed in schools, but the main problem with the assessment is the fact that it is academic-oriented rather than all round assessment. It was

not also an on-going process, but “one-shot assessment” which would not capture the necessary information needed to guide and improve teaching, learning, and development of children.

Finally, the study showed that the major methods of scoring used for children were numerical values of “Marks Obtainable” versus “Marks Obtained” (e.g., 60/100) as well as rating procedure of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 or A, B, C etc. These procedures do not really give the true picture of children as they may be subjective as Gullo (2005) has earlier pointed out. Hatch (2018) also has stressed that grading children using pass/fail keys is not developmentally appropriate because children operate at different levels of development. Wissner-Gross (2015), in her own case, has blamed the poor performance of learners in the United States of America to this type of grading system and advocated de-grading education for mastery-based learning.

Conclusion

The study has examined the assessment procedure in Nigeria’s public primary schools where basic education is in operation. It has been established that though assessment is carried out, it is grossly developmentally inappropriate as the totality of the child was not given the attention it requires. Also, the procedure of scoring children’s performance is inappropriate to give a true nature of the child’s ability and competencies. It is, therefore, recommended that developmentally appropriate assessment that would meet the individual needs of the children as well as give adequate information about the child as well as the programme children are exposed to should be adopted in Nigeria’s pre-primary schools. Teachers at this educational level should be exposed to training and re-training on developmentally appropriate assessment process in the early childhood level so that the needs of children would be adequately met in the attainment of quality basic education. Teacher preparation programme should give attention to assessment issues that would help teachers in training to be well-grounded in the pedagogy of what they would face in practice. Parents of the pre-primary level should be enlightened on the assessment procedure that is developmentally inappropriate and the implications of using the

appropriate assessment procedure in the holistic development of children. Curriculum planners and policymakers should incorporate the developmentally appropriate assessment procedure in the school curriculum and educational policy. Regular supervision of schools should be embarked upon by the educational agencies to ascertain the adoption of the appropriate assessment procedure for children at this level of education for quality assurance.

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