



## CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT: A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY SCHOOL LEARNERS

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### **Abstract:**

Information gathering about young school learners during the teaching-learning process involves a wide variety of tools. Such tools are not only formal, but largely informal. Classroom assessment is simply the deployment of these tools cyclically to track the progress of young learners with a view to improving teaching and learning. This paper explores assessment tools for young school learners and presents a graphic illustration of the cycle of assessment. Problems and challenges capable of inhibiting classroom assessment processes were cited, along with recommendations.

**Keywords:** assessment, assessment tools, cycle of assessment

### **1. Meaning and scope of educational assessment**

Assessment in education is concerned with the array of tools and methods educators use to obtain information about learners with a view to tracking and making informed decisions about their learning. Essentially, what educators aim at, when assessments are carried out on pupils or students, is improved and progressive learning. In classroom assessment, wide ranging approaches, both formal and informal, are usually deployed by the teacher to x-ray the learner on all fronts of educational objectives – cognitive, psychomotor and affective. Joshua (2005), in corroborating this broad picture of the concept of assessment, defines it as the global process of synthesizing information about individuals so as to describe, understand and perhaps help them better. And that, though tests are frequently used in the process of assessment, a variety of other sources of information, both formal and informal were required in the same process.

It is important to note that, though standardized tests, prepared by accredited examination bodies and administered to large populations of testees, are central to

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learners' assessments, none of them entirely embodies the assessment process. Ioannou-Georgiou (2003) defines assessment as *"a general term which includes all methods used to gather information about children's knowledge, ability, understanding, attitudes, and motivation."* While assessment defines an all-embracing process that synthesizes empirical data about the learner, test, of whatever form, is only a component of that process. Assessment is not a one-stop activity. It is on-going and takes a variety of forms. Earl (2015) described three basic forms of classroom assessment:

1. Assessment for learning (formative assessment): This occurs during instruction to be used in the service of the next stage of learning.
2. Assessment as learning: Here assessment occurs when students personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations, and even major changes in what they understand.
3. Assessment of learning (summative assessment): This is designed to certify learning and report to parents and learners about their progress in school.

## **2. Meaning of and the rationale for the assessment of early learners**

Assessment of early learners involves data gathering by their instructors arising from and for purposes of improving classroom teaching-learning processes. The Massachusetts Department of Early Education (2014) defines Childhood assessment as a process of gathering information about a child, reviewing the information, and then using the information to plan educational activities that are at a level the child can understand and is able to learn from. It is seen as a critical part of a high-quality, early childhood program. When educators do an assessment, they observe a child to get information about what he knows and what he can do. And that, observing and documenting a child's work and performance over the course of a year allows an educator to accumulate a record of the child's growth and development. With this information, educators can begin to plan appropriate curriculum and effective individualized instruction for each child.

This assessment record is also a great tool to share with parents so they can follow their child's progress at school, understand their child's strengths and challenges, and plan how they can help extend the learning into their homes. The Massachusetts Department of Early Education (2014) equally outlines the rationale for early learners' assessment, noting that, assessment can:

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

- Provide a common ground between educators and parents or families to use in collaborating on a strategy to support their child.

### 3. Tools for the assessment of early learners

The peculiarities of early learners call for serious caution in the choice and appropriation of tools deployed in their assessment. Effective assessment tools go a long way to guide the educator to make informed decisions about his learners and possibly review his method of instruction to suit the developmental and or learning needs of the child. Educators often use the following tools to assess early learners:

1. **Observation:** This has to do with the teacher or educator keeping a watchful eye on the learner or learners during learning activities without necessarily interrupting or interfering with such activities. Sustained learner-observation over time can help the instructor make far-reaching discoveries about the child's learning progress or otherwise. According to Gronlund (2014), teachers can focus their observations in many different ways: (i) on one child or a group of children (ii) on a domain or area of learning (such as fine motor or math) (iii) on a specific benchmark (such as pencil grasp or recognition of shapes and (iv) on an area of the classroom or a specific activity. And that, in documenting observations, teachers should only note the facts...what they see & hear, what the child does & says and not interpretations...not what they think about the facts (until they've collected enough to support their interpretation!). Printer (2006) noted that observation is non-intrusive and very flexible. Teachers can assess children in a variety of situations, example, working alone, groups or pairs.
2. **Anecdotal records:** These are records with entries of the child's activities in the learning process, including indications of performance profile over time.
3. **Assessment portfolio:** This is a document that records samples of the child's works during the teaching-learning process. It shows evidence of the child's learning progress or otherwise.
4. **Checklist:** This takes a dichotomous response format, such as, yes/no, on/off, available/not available and so on. It indicates the presence or otherwise of what is being assessed.
5. **Rating scale:** This is an assessment tool that indicates the degree or extent to which a given skill, knowledge or behavior is learned by the child.
6. **Conference:** A one-on-one conversation involving a teacher and his or her pupil to allow for free learner expression or a teacher-parent interaction for purposes of providing learning feedback.
7. **Rubric:** This is an assessment tool that identifies the features that will be graded in a learner's performance. For instance, what and what should be present in pupil's performance or product.

8. Self-assessment: This has to do with learners producing their own list of characteristics or qualities to evaluate themselves. Pupils who make effort to monitor their own progress and judge their performance strive to improve.
9. Peer assessment: This tool helps learners understand what is expected of them. It involves a learner assessing his/her classmate.
10. Classroom and standardized tests: These are formal assessment tools that judge learners' performance against standards or norms.

#### **4. Components of assessment for early learners**

The main thrust of this paper is to explore authentic assessment, which the writer deems most appropriate for young learners. Authentic assessment, as described by Mueller (2018), is a form of assessment in which learners are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills. It usually involves a task for learners to perform and a rubric by which their performance on the task is evaluated. To get a well-rounded picture of pupils' understanding and progress in learning, assessment strategies must be comprehensive. There has to be a sustained and cyclical process of observing, evaluating and communicating learning progress of the child. Utah Education Network (2003) reported that early childhood assessment is composed of three essential, interrelated components:

##### **a. Documentation (data collection)**

This involves observing, collecting, and reviewing children's work over time. Assessment essentially calls for observing children regularly and collecting samples of their work. Here emphasis is on discovering what a child already knows and is able to do. Acknowledging learners' understanding promotes the child's sense of competence and provides teachers with clues about what and how to teach.

##### **b. Evaluation (comparison to a standard)**

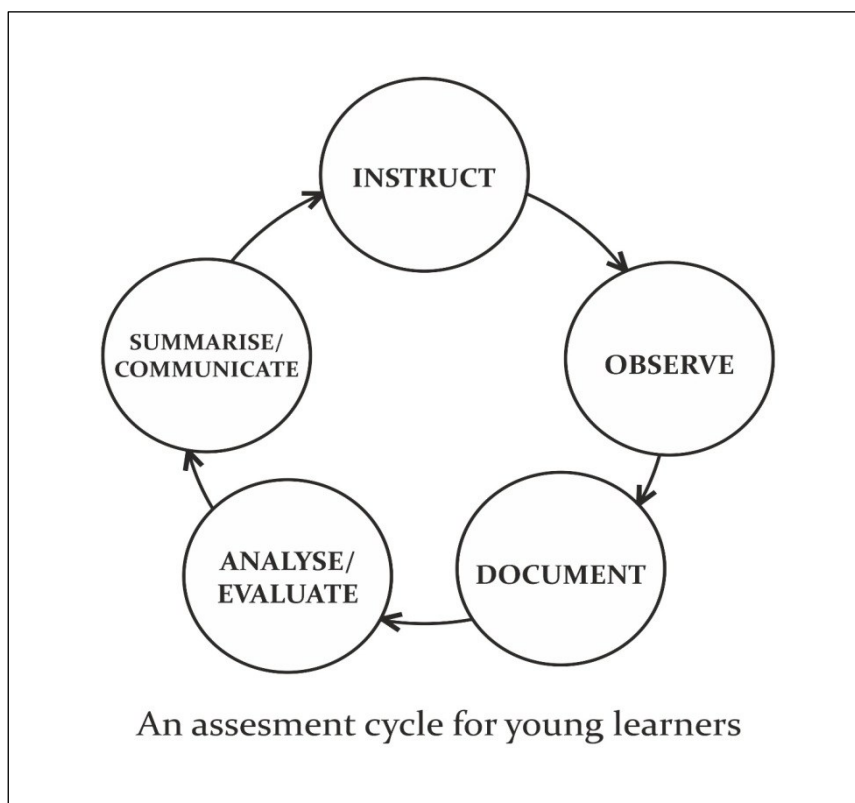
Here the information gathered about a learner is compared to the standard expected of him. This provides instructional guide for the teacher, evaluates teaching strategies, track learners' progress, and identifies learners with special needs that require additional interventions or services. Although standards are designed to provide consistent expectations for all children, instruction must be molded to fit each child's individual strengths and needs. The insights gained from early assessment can serve as the basis for instruction. As teachers observe learners at work, they can modify the learning experiences offered to meet the individual needs of their learners.

##### **c. Family communication (sharing both progress and performance)**

Families are keen about receiving information regarding their children's progress and performance. Such information must be comprehensive to forestall any misleading impression about a child's progress and performance. Any feedback showing specific examples of learners' progress over time enables parents to personally assess the growth and progress of their children.

## 5. Cyclical assessment model for young learners

The assessment process, especially for early learners, has to be all-embracing and detailed. This will allow the educator to get a true, comprehensive and unmistakable picture of the child's learning progress and provide clues to learning difficulties and instructional gaps for his intervention appropriately. For the teacher to be so adequately informed of the holistic learning profile of his pupils, a cyclical model of assessment must be followed. That is, where instruction is offered as an initial step and other stages follow through to the end (communication) and the cycle repeats with (instruction). This way, the teacher would easily and effectively review instructional approaches and equally accommodate different levels and peculiarities of learners in the course of teaching. A simple cyclical assessment model is being illustrated.



The Department of Early Education and Care (2014) outlays the cycle as follows:

- Instruct.
- Observe: observe children in various situations.
- Document, Reflect: Record while observing or as soon as possible.
- Analyze, Evaluate: Study the data with assessment tools. The assessment comes from the combination of documentation and evaluation.
- Summarize, Plan, and Communicate. This informs a child's specific needs and future curriculum.
- Instruct (The cycle repeats).

## **6. Problems and challenges associated with the assessment of young learners in Nigeria**

Assessment seeks to gather information about learners with a view to tracking their learning for instructional intervention and a well-rounded learning progress. Classroom assessment for young school learners in Nigeria is plagued with a variety of problems and challenges. A few of them are discussed in this section.

- a) **Emphasis on cognitive assessment:** There have been concerns expressed by some stakeholders in education about the seeming over-emphasis on the assessment of learning objectives in the cognitive domain by the school system, obviously at the expense of other domains of learning. This does not give a detailed account of a child's learning profile and is bound to generate a feedback about the child's competence that is grossly misleading.
- b) **Poor funding of education:** The school system in Nigeria is poorly funded by the Government. Teachers are apparently the least motivated in the country's workforce. Thus, their attitude towards this robust and all-inclusive task of learner – assessment, which is critical, in their work schedule, has remained poor.
- c) **Paucity of trained instructors:** This problem has the dire consequence of overstretching the few available instructors with little or no results and even denying learners in many schools the benefit of being taught and assessed by trained instructors.
- d) **Poor family engagement in learner assessment:** Some parents feel child assessment is the exclusive reserve of the classroom teacher and they have no roles at all to play in such an activity. Berlin (2018) observed that lack of engagement of families in helping children with home- work and the like can hamper their learning progress.
- e) **Lack of trust between teachers and parents:** Young learners can progress rapidly in learning through the collaborative effort of teachers and parents. Where trust is lacking, as is the case in some of our communities, parent-teacher synergy would not be deployed in the interest of the learner.
- f) **Engagement of untrained instructors:** Learner assessment is a highly professional task that should be reserved only for trained instructors. Little wonder that, learners who are said to have passed through the school system still remain academically deficient in a variety of ways. Those most susceptible to these untrained teachers are the young learners.

## **7. Conclusion**

The array of tools involved in the assessment of young learners is complementary. They all serve to sharpen the instructor's clue about the learner. The assessment process follows a cyclical pattern to allow for improvement in teaching and learning.

## 7.1 Recommendations

Some of the problems and challenges that inhibit effective assessment of young learners are institutional. Others are rooted in negligence on the part of Governments and proprietors of schools. A few recommendations have been proffered.

- a) Revival of teacher-retraining policy: Government should assign higher premium to refresher training program for teachers. The need for this cannot be overstressed, especially with globally evolving innovations and approaches in educational assessment.
- b) Professionalization of teaching: Entry into the teaching job, as it were, should no more be free for all. Those who desire to be classroom teachers should be passed through series of high-stake screening tests to qualify. Essentially, only candidates with education-based trainings should be admitted into the profession.
- c) Increase of budgetary provision for education: Government should prioritize funding of education at all levels, especially at the early stages of learning. The UNESCO benchmark budgetary provision of 26% for education should even be exceeded by nations of the world. A situation where single digit percentages are allotted to education, as is the case with Nigeria in recent years, amounts to a deliberate effort at mortgaging the nation's future.
- d) Employment of more teachers to reduce pupil-teacher ratio: Pupil-teacher ratio is critical to the realization of the outcomes expected from any teaching-learning process. Where too many pupils are taught by one teacher at a time, the learning output is bound to be low. A high pupil-teacher ratio certainly takes a huge toll on the effectiveness of the assessment processes. More teachers should be employed to breach assessment gaps.
- e) Evolution of policies that will institutionalize inclusive assessment. That is, assessment of instructional objectives covering all three domains of learning (cognitive, affective and psychomotor). What appears to be currently invoked is assessment of learning objectives with the confines of cognition.
- f) Monitoring and supervision: For the assessment, strategies and model already discussed in this paper to be followed through copiously by instructors and school managers, Government must put in place machineries for effective monitoring and supervision.
- g) Teacher-motivation: A poorly motivated teacher may hardly put in his/her best on the job. Government should muster the will power of improving teachers' capacity and their general welfare for result-oriented service delivery, especially in terms of learner assessment.
- h) Provision of learning resources: Lack of learning resources can seriously inhibit the effective assessment of young learners. School managers or other relevant authorities should provide physical settings and other resources that promote authentic learner assessment.
- i) Re-awakening parent-teacher synergy to enhance learner assessment: The complementary role of parents in the assessment of young learners should be

exploited. This can be achieved through the formation and strengthening of parent-teacher platforms.

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