

Assessment in Preschools in Ghana: Issues and Challenges

Eric Anane^{1*} Yaw Mensah Anhwere²

1. Institute of Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
2. DHR, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

*nanakojo75@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper focuses on a very critical area, assessment in preschools in Ghana. It discusses the issues and challenges in Ghana's early childhood education system. Educational Reforms since 1987 have advocated the inclusion of nursery and kindergarten education in the basic school system. In all of these reforms, especially that of 1987 and 2007, efforts were not made to critically look at establishing standards for the smooth running of such early childhood programmes. Also, assessment procedures to help in achieving the major purposes of the programme as introduced in some selected schools in 1987 and as a beginning point of Ghana's education as stipulated in 2007 reforms were not clearly stated. It is on this note that the authors discuss the issues and the numerous challenges that have evolved in assessing young children between the ages of 3 and 8 years in Ghana's education system. This paper, as a caveat from a discussant paper presented during a national conference in early childhood education in Ghana, addresses the issues of assessing young children by reviewing major purposes of assessment, action options to improve the system, challenges in assessing young children and recommendations for good practice.

Keywords: preschool, early childhood, development appropriate assessment, educational reforms, standards.

1. Introduction

Stakeholders and policy makers in education are interested in information on the well-being of young children. Similarly parents should be made aware of whether their children are ready for formal education. Also, school administrators and teachers need to know if programmes being run in their schools are effective and if whether the schools are providing young children with the right programmes and services to cater for the broad and rapid development of young children. All of these call for a comprehensive gathering and analysis of information through the use of assessment tools.

Yet, young children are disreputably difficult to assess accurately and that clear guidelines regarding the nature, functions and uses of early childhood assessments, including assessment formats that are appropriate for use in culturally and linguistically diverse communities must be created to help in establishing a developmentally appropriate assessments in preschools in Ghana. This is very important since all children deserve to be served equitably early care and educational services as well as, if the need be, by interventions services. This requires that there may be fair and effective personnel and tools to assess their learning and identify their needs.

In matters of early childhood education, informal assessments have characterized the field and these have proven effective for purposes of chronicling children's development, cataloging their accomplishments, and tailoring programmes and activities within the classroom to meet young children's development, cataloging their accomplishments, and tailoring programmes and activities within the classroom to meet young children's rapidly changing needs (Shepard & Kagan, 1998).

Currently, however, it does appear a number of preschool and kindergarten assessments, mostly teacher made, are being used across the country (Ghana) with a variety of objectives and collection procedures. These assessment practices come, and often than not, as formal assessments and testing, the results of which are often used to make critical decisions such as tracking youngsters into high-and low-ability groups, (mis) labeling or retaining them, or using test results to sort children into or out of preschools.

This paper attempts to signify how best to craft such assessments in the light of young children's unique development, measurement considerations and principles that govern assessment of young children's development and learning. In addition, the paper discusses how to integrate curriculum and assessment in educational programmes for young children, adopt assessment practices that are developmentally appropriate for young children, assessment procedures that will fulfill the major purpose of assessment in early childhood programmes, and how to meet the legitimate demands from parents and the public for clear and useful information and bring out the expertise needed to construct, administer and use assessment instrument in early part of a child's school years.

2. Assessing Young Children's Development and Learning

Assessment in the field of early childhood education has been defined variously by pundits in the area, but three notable definitions will be discussed in this paper.

1. Assessment as defined by Dodge, Jablon and Bickart (1994) is the process of gathering information

about children in order to make decisions about their education. Teachers obtain useful information about children's knowledge, skills, and progress by observing, and reviewing children's work over time.

Ongoing assessment that occurs in the context of classroom activities can provide an accurate, fair and representative picture of children's abilities and progress' (p.181).

2. To the National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Department Education (NAEYC & NAECS), USA, (1990), assessment is the process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting the work children do and how they do it, as a basis for a variety of educational decisions that affect the child. Assessment is integral to curriculum and instruction.
3. According to Hills (1992), assessment involves "the multiple steps of collecting data on a child's development and learning, determining its significance in light of the programme goals and objectives, incorporating the information into planning for individuals and programme, and communicating the findings to parents and other involved parents" (p. 43).

These definitions suggest a multidisciplinary approach to assessing young children. Thus, assessment of young children should make use of a variety of approaches and a range of evidence to assess the different types of achievement across the curriculum. Therefore, assessment of young children must include a systematic observation of behaviour, multiple assessment procedures, multiple sources and settings of information gathering in order to generate a comprehensive understanding of young children's skills and needs.

What is more, assessing children in their early years of life (from 3 to age 8) could be described as difficult in that:

1. It is the period when young children's rates of physical, motor, and linguistic development outpace growth rates at all other stages. Growth is rapid, episodic, and highly influenced by environmental supports: nurturing parents, quality care giving, and learning setting (Shephard & Kagan, 1998).
2. Young children learn in ways and at rates different from other children and adult and therefore we must tailor our assessments accordingly.
3. Young children come to know things through doing as well as through listening and often represent their knowledge better by showing than talking or writing and that paper-and-pencil-tests are not appropriate.
4. Young children do not have the experience to understand the goals of what formal testing are, and that testing interactions may be very difficult or impossible to structure appropriately.
5. Young children develop and learn so fast and that test giving, at one point in time, may not give a complete picture of learning and
6. Because young children's achievement at any point is a result of a complex mix of their ability to learn and past learning opportunities, it is a mistake to interpret measures of past learning as evidence of what could be learned (Shepard, 1997).

For these reasons, how teachers and early childhood practitioners assess young childhood and the principles that frame such assessments need special attention. Early childhood practitioners must be aware that what works for older children or adults will not work for younger children; they have unique needs that stakeholders are obliged to recognize if they are to optimize their development and learning.

3. Measurement Consideration in Assessing Young Children

In real life, children are mostly themselves when they are in familiar environment with adults and children whom they know and trust, engaged in tasks that allow them to use the modalities with which they are most comfortable. In such situations they will most likely demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are truly representative of their attainments (i.e., assessments should be valid). When we introduce strange people, unfamiliar surroundings, demands for responses to atypical tasks, and constructions on their usual behaviours, we will likely elicit behaviours that are neither valid nor reliable (consistent) samples of the children's development and learning (Hills, 1993, p. 22). This, therefore, calls for a developmentally appropriate form of assessments in terms of age and individual appropriateness.

In order to achieve such developmentally appropriate assessments in Ghanaian preschools, certain critical measurement issues should be considered. These are:

1. *Defining the intended purpose of the assessment.* Assessment of young children must be based on information adequate for all the major purposes of assessment (Dodge, Jablon, & Bickart, 1994; Hills 1992). That is (1) instructional planning and communicating with parents. (2) Identifying children who need supplements or alternatives to the programme planned for typical children and deciding what those needs are, (3) determining the worth of the programme). There is, therefore, the need for the intended purpose of the assessment to be succinctly stated.

2. *Selecting the method and instrument for the assessment.* In recent times, the use of an ecological model to guide assessment in preschools is advocated (Vazquez-Nuttal, Nuttal & Hampel, 1999). This means that the ideal method of assessing young children is through authentic, naturalistic observations and recordings that take place on a continual basis. The method selected should be informal observations, which should occur during the day to day activities, teaching and care routines to describe the development and learning of young children. It should be noted that, is very difficult to achieve valid and reliable assessment information at this level and that the assessment should not be one-time event (NAEYC, NAECS & SDE, 2003). To this end, in selecting methods and instruments to assess young children, we should bear in mind that there is instability of the very traits most instruments seek to measure as a result of development burst and inconsistencies in children's behaviour.
3. *Determining the process for conducting the assessment.* Another area of equal importance as the assessment itself is the process of conducting the assessment. Methodological problems that plague assessments (Pyle, 2002), especially in childhood education due to the episodic developments and the unstable traits being measured which clearly are indications that the results obtained from such assessments may not be reliable. Moreso, in keeping with the emerging ecological definitions of readiness, it is advocated that assessment should include multiple sources of information over multiple settings (Pyle, 2002) and raters. Assessing young children should involve the use of multiple raters which can be in the form of what Meisels (1993: 37) termed as 'The Work Sampling System'. This approach hinges on teacher observations, use of checklists to increase the reliability of observation and gathers samples of children's work to gauge their performance. In fact, what Meisels has suggested is a performance assessment system that offers an alternative to standardized tests with young children (Pyle, 2002).
4. *Using the assessment results.* In using the assessment results, one needs to think carefully about how to analyze and interpret the uses to which the results are put and the consequences thereof. For example, assessments at the early years need to be self-referencing or growth-based (Nitko, 2001), that is, grades should be assigned to pupils based on the teacher's perception of his/her growth and therefore, results from any data gathered should be interpreted as such.

4. Major purposes of assessing young children

In order to achieve the maximum benefits of assessing young children, teachers should be made the primary assessors, since they essentially need the data gathered from the children to determine their day-to-day performance and progress.

As Hills (1992) stressed, "the teacher is the primary assessor in the early childhood programme, as the individual who is closest to the child, most responsible for the quality of the programme, best positioned to coordinate the needs of individual children with the programme goals and objectives, and the most likely to have the information that parents and other interested persons need" (p. 45). These assessments, whether from the teacher or other stakeholders are to serve the major purposes of assessing young children (Nitko, 2004; Dodge, Jablon, & Bickart, 1994; Hills, 1992). This, therefore, suggests that the information collected should serve as a foundation for:

1. Instructional planning (i.e., assessment support teaching and learning) and communicating with parents. Some basic questions such as the following could be asked to be certain on what to do organize instruction and relay information to parents and other stakeholders. To achieve this feat, these are some of the questions that need to be asked:
 - a) What are this child's strengths, needs and learning processes?
 - b) How is this child doing?
 - c) How will this child's instruction and guidance be planned?
2. Assessment policies should be designed recognizing that reliability and validity of assessments increase with children's age
3. Assessment should be developmentally (in terms of age and linguistics) appropriate in both content and the method of data collection.
4. Parents and teachers should constitute a valued source of assessment information, and parents, an audience for assessment results.

5. Steps and Methods of Collecting and Interpreting Information

Assessment instruments and methods change as children develop from birth to age 8 or basic three. In early years, children's developments are in spurts and gusts; that authentic assessments are emphasized. In conducting such assessments, the following steps are ideal when working with young children:

1. Use only authentic curriculum-based scales to the greatest extent

2. Compile ongoing observations for every child frequently (at least 3 times a year) and over time.
3. Gather information from multiple sources such as teachers, aids, parents and other caregivers who know the child well and observe daily children's naturally occurring thinking, language, social, motor and self-control skills (Meisels, 1985).
4. Watch, observe and record each child's strong and weak skills on continuous basis.
5. For children with developmental disabilities, use ONLY measures that have been designed and field-validated for use with children having specific needs.
6. Use information collected over time to make critical about the child.

In order to achieve this feat of collecting, organizing and interpreting information, Hills (1992) has described some methods of observing and recording data that could go a long way to help practitioners. This information incorporates Gordon and Brown's (1985) classification of ways to observe and record, with additional points from Beaty (1990):

1. **Narratives** – attempts to record as much as possible of what happens within the focus of the observation. Some common narratives which could be used in preschools are:
 - a. Dairy description – a chronological record of individual children's behaviour made after the teacher needs to understand more fully. Examples: aggressive, avoiding, complaint, disruptive, passive, withdrawn behaviour in certain kinds of interpersonal situations; ways of engaging materials and/or interacting with others in specified learning activities.
 - b. *Anecdotal record* – a descriptive narrative recorded after the behaviour; used to detail specific behaviour for children's records and for teacher's planning, conferencing, etc.
 - c. *Running record* – a sequential record over a given time, recorded while the behaviour is occurring; used to document what children are doing in the particular situation (with a focus on social or pre-academic/academic activity); used for teachers' planning for individuals or groups.
 - d. *Specimen description* – detailed notes on an identified situation recorded while the behaviour is occurring; often with the aid of video or audio recordings; used to discover cause-and-effect relationships in individual children's behaviours, to analyze classroom management, etc.
 - e. *Log or Journal* – a recording of brief details about each child in the group, usually made after the behaviour occurs. It is used to describe the status and progress of every child in the group over time.
2. **Time sampling** – an observation of what happens within a given period of time, coded with tallies or symbols while the behaviour is occurring. This is used to document the frequency of specific behaviours.
3. **Event sampling** – an observation of an event that has been defined in advance and what happens before and after, recorded briefly while it is taking place. It is used to observe and record children's social-personal interactions with the teacher and other children as a basis to plan desirable interventions.
4. **Modified child study techniques** – there are a variety of techniques originally used in child study research, which can be adapted for use by teachers, including the following:
 - a. *Shadow study* – a detailed, in-depth observation of one child at a time, done by multiple staff members, using mostly narrative methods. It is used to gain a more comprehensive understanding of individual children and, in so doing, enhance understanding of all children. A shadow study is time consuming, but the views of multiple observers can provide a rich, relatively objective picture of the child's behaviour. Those who engage in shadow studies value their enhanced understanding of children and the professional growth and results.
 - b. *Checklist* – a list on which the teacher (or parent or other adults) checks the behaviours or traits observed before, during, or after the behaviour occurs.
 - c. *Rating scale* – a list of behaviours made into a scale, using frequency of behaviour, level of mastery, etc., which the observer checks before, during, or after the behaviour.

6. Challenges of Assessing Young Children Appropriately in Ghana

6.1 Lack of standards

Most of the previous reforms in Ghana lacked standards, even though, more often than not, policy makers and stakeholders in education talk of 'falling' standards. For assessment results to be meaningful and useful, they must be linked to clear development or knowledge continua, with benchmarks along the way to illustrate what progress looks like (NEGP, 1998). On the whole, teachers and early childhood programmes cannot develop standards on their own and it appears the central government is not ready for such an undertaking, the results of which caregivers, teachers and school proprietors are running their own programmes as and when it suits them.

6.2 Young children as test-takers

Powell and Sigel (1991), note that traditional assessments are inappropriate for young children. They assert that "young children are not good candidates for taking traditional tests. The reliability and validity of test results are

greatly compromised by the child's rapid changes in development, fluctuations in the intensity and focus of interests, and the unfamiliarity of the assessment situation" (p. 194). Conversely, the uses of teacher-made tests as a mode of assessing young children seem to be the norm in Ghana and sometimes some early childhood centres go to the extent of buying commercially prepared questions to be administered to young children between the ages of 3 and 8. This situation poses problems in achieving curriculum goals and likely to limit the appropriate developmental processes of the children in early years in school.

6.3 Managing the negative effects of testing on curriculum

Shepard (1994), writes about the 'negative history of standardized testing of young children in the past decade,' which includes a distortion of curriculum in the early grades, including a "skill-driven" "kindergarten curriculum" and "escalation of curriculum" or "academic trickle-down" (pp. 206-207). "Developmentally inappropriate instructional practices, characterized by long periods of seat work, high levels of stress, and a plethora of fill-in-the-blank worksheets, placed many children at risk by setting standards for attention span, social maturity, and academic productivity that could not be met by many normal 5 – year olds" (p. 207). Anane (2007) describes influences that caused many teachers to align their curriculum and instruction to the specific focus of the tests that are nationally conducted by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the uses to which the results are put. Thus the results have brought about a narrowing curriculum, a concentration on those skills most acquiescent to testing, a constraint on the creativity and flexibility of teachers. These outcomes represent a vast alteration in educational policy, aided and abetted by the inappropriate use of tests. It is therefore feared that this can tackle down and create an emerging crisis in public early childhood education.

6.4 Teachers' expertise and assessing young children

Quality caregivers are, also, essential in early childhood programme and yet, in developing countries, such as Ghana, those who work with young children typically receive less training than their primary school counterparts. Even in urban areas where early education is quite 'refined', very few highly trained educators often work alongside with a huge number of untrained childcare workers. Early childhood educators, therefore lack the necessary competence in aligning curriculum with testing and assessment tools to achieve the national goals.

6.5 Overcoming abuses and misuses of tests for assessing young children

The problem of high-stakes and accountability has crept into our education system, including early childhood education. In other developed worlds such as USA, abuses and misuses of tests for assessing young children have been documented (Meisels, 1987, 1989, 1993, Shepard, 1991, 1994). Excessive use of standardized tests is especially inappropriate (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987). Standardised achievement tests alone cannot fulfill the major purposes of assessment in programmes for young children. Those purposes are: instructional planning and communicating with parents, identification of children with special needs, and programme evaluation and accountability (Hills, 1992). Yet, educators in early childhood years seemed to have been overtaken by the pressures in the school system and are putting undue pressure on young children to sit for pencil and paper tests of which some of the 'candidates' cannot even read what the test papers present. Teachers and caregivers have to sometimes read examination questions to pupils, and pupils give responses presumably based on what they hear from their teachers (examiners). And results from these tests are interpreted by people, who are mostly not trained in early childhood education, and those who are trained, have limited or no knowledge in assessment in basic schools.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is to be noted that early childhood programmes make for strong foundations and pay high dividends. All assessments that provide summaries of young learners' progress and achievements for those within and beyond the school require high credibility and therefore, need to have both high validity and high reliability. As part of planning, staff should build in opportunities to discuss and share assessment approaches (such as observations and checklists, anecdotal records, portfolios and inventories) and expectations with colleagues to ensure their appropriateness and soundness of the intended outcomes (validity) be achieved and that assessments are fairly and consistently applied for all learners (reliability). Such sharing and reflections will develop the preschool teachers and caregivers' common understanding of the outcomes and criteria for arriving at sound evaluation of learning in preschools.

8. Recommendations

In line with the various issues raised and the challenges discussed, the following recommendations are made: The Ministry of Education should

1. engage teachers, administrators and experts from the Universities in determining what necessary assessment information (with regard to instructional planning and communicating with parents, identifying children who need supplements or alternatives to the programme planned for typical children, and determining the worth of the programme) is and is not available through their current

- assessment procedures.
2. Establish standards of practice for both private and public preschools.
 3. Eliminate routine use of standardized tests for all young children and engage experts to design appropriate assessment scales for preschools in Ghana.
 4. Train teachers who are the primary assessors for the children they teach since they will use the assessment information to design appropriate instruction.
 5. Include in teacher evaluation and individual professional development plans, teachers' acquisition and use of the skills and knowledge to carry out developmentally appropriate assessment and a repertoire of strategies for collecting, recording, and interpreting assessment information, including portfolios.
 6. Provide information about the rationale and implementation of the assessment programme to those who have a stake in the assessment of young children, including parents, teachers and children.

References

- Anhwere, Y. M. (2009). Assessment practices in the teacher training colleges of Ghana. *Unpublished master's thesis*. University of Cape Coast.
- Anane, E. (2007). Effect of high-stakes testing on curriculum implementation and instruction in Senior High Schools in Ashanti Region of Ghana. *Unpublished master's thesis*. University of Cape Coast.
- Bartels, E. K. (2003). The practice of continuous assessment in teacher training colleges in Ghana. *Journal of education development and practice*, 1(1), 59–72.
- Beatty, J. (1990). *Observing development of the young child*. Columbus, OH: Charles Merrill.
- Dodge, D. T., Jablon, J. R., & Bickart, T. S. (1994). *Constructing curriculum for the primary grades*. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies.
- Etsey, Y. K. (2003). Pre-service teachers' knowledge of continuous assessment techniques in Ghana. *Journal of education development and practice*, 1(1), 1–18.
- Gordon, A. M., & Browne, K. W. (1985). *Beginnings and beyond: Foundations in early childhood education*. New York: Delmar.
- Hills, T. W. (1992). Reaching potentials through appropriate assessment. In S. Bredekamp & T. Rosegrant, (Eds.), *Reaching potentials: appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children*, 1, 43–63. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Hills, T. W. (1992). Reaching potentials through appropriate assessment. In S. Bredekamp & T. Rosegrant, (Eds.), *Reaching potentials: appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children*, 1, 43–63. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Hills, T. W. (1993). Assessment in context: Teachers and children at work. *Young children*, 48(5), 20–28.
- Meisels, S. J. (1985). *Development screening in early childhood: A guide*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education in Young Children.
- Meisels, S. J. (1993). Rethinking classroom assessment with the Work Sampling System. *Young Children*, 48(5), 34–40.
- National Association for the education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (1990). *Guidelines for appropriate curriculum content and assessment in programs serving children ages 3 through 8*, NAEYC. Available at <http://www.naeyc.org/resources/ps>.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (2003). Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation—Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth Through Age 8. Available online at www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/pscuras.htm.
- Nitko, A. J. (2001). *Educational assessment of students* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Nitko, A. J. (2004). *Educational assessments of students*. NJ: Englewood Cliffs.
- Nuttall, E. V. Nuttall-Vasquez, K., & Hampel, A. (1999). Introduction. In E. V. Nuttall, I. Romero & J. Kalesnik (Eds.), *Assessing and screening preschoolers: Psychological and educational dimensions*. (pp. 1–8). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Powell, D. R., & Sigel, I. E. (1991). Searches for validity in evaluating young children and early childhood programs. In B. Spodek & O. N. Saracho (Eds.), *Issues in early childhood education. Year book in early childhood education*, 2, (pp. 190-212). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Pyle, R. P. (2002). Best practices in assessing kindergarten readiness. *California school psychologist*, 7, 63–73.
- Shepard, L. A. (1994). *Principles and recommendations for early childhood assessments*. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel.
- Shepard, L. A. (1997). Children not ready to learn? The invalidity of school readiness testing. *Psychology in the schools* 34(2): 85–97.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. There's no deadline for submission. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a **fast** manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Recent conferences: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

