

Tools Teachers Use to Assess Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders to Place Them in Educational Programmes in Special Schools: A Case Study of Kampala District, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the assessment strategies utilized by teachers in Kampala District, Uganda, to place learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in special educational programs in special schools in Kampala district. Employing a case study design, the research involved twelve participants from two schools serving children with autism, selected through purposive sampling. Data collection methods included teacher interviews, participant observations, focus group discussions and analysis of relevant documents. The findings indicated that there are no standardized assessment tools for learners with ASD; instead, observation was identified as the primary assessment method. Other methods, including interviews and document analysis, were also employed, highlighting a multi-faceted approach to assessment for educational placement. The study advocates for the development of a harmonized assessment tool for use by teachers nationwide.

Keywords: Assessment, Autism, Educational Programs, Placement, Teacher, Tools.

INTRODUCTION

Autism is one of the disabilities defined in the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 392-172A-01035 (2007). The IDEA(2004), defines autism as a developmental disability that significantly affects verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, a child's educational performance and is generally evident before age three.

Unfortunately, Uganda does not have enough professionals to diagnose the children earlier before three years which delays the placement process or leads to misplacement of children with the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

Sembatya, (2014), states that “communities such as those in Uganda with very few people knowing about autism are left with no choice but to rely on traditional or non-evidence based approaches to define, diagnose and manage it”.

ASD is now recognized as one the most common neurological disorder (Geneva Centre for Autism, 2006) and has been found throughout the world in families of all racial, ethnic and social background yet it was once a rare disorder. It is diagnosed more frequently in males than in females worldwide; males are four times more affected than females (Chakrabarti & Fombonne, 2005). The figures include among others, 60 (vs. 4 to 6) per 10,000 in the general population, a 600% increase in the numbers served under the autism IDEA eligibility classification (Brock, 2005), and 95% of school psychologists report an increase in the number of students with ASD being referred for assessment (Kohrt, 2004).

Assessment is a necessary step in the overall program planning for children with Autism Spectrum disorders. However, children with ASD are likely to present unique challenges and issues during formal evaluation which may impact the success of the evaluation process and the utility of the assessment data. (Klin, Saulnier, Tsatsanis & Volkmar 2005).

(Specialized Assessment in Uganda) – Kyaninga Child Development Centre (KCDC)(2015) estimated that 1 in 10 children in Uganda are born with the disability and many more develop disabilities early on in life due to poor diet, illness or injury. In addition, KCDC (2015) has highly experienced physiotherapists who assess and treat babies, children and young adults with a wide range of injuries and disabilities including, but not limited to cerebral palsy, acquired brain injury, paralysis, downs syndrome and autism spectrum disorders. Unfortunately, it's one center among the few and its location may be very far from all persons with autism, who may require such services

Other estimates reveal that out of 42 boys and one in 189 girls are diagnosed with autism in the United States and the most current estimates from studies in Canada and United Kingdom are that ASD is diagnosed in 60 out of every 10,000 children or one in 165 (Fombonne, Zakarian, Bennet, Meng, & McLean Hey Wood, 2006).

While there is much research on ASD in Europe and North America, there is not a single community based epidemiological study of ASD in sub Saharan Africa (Bakare & Munir, 2011 the authors believe that there are few studies examining the prevalence of ASD in children with intellectual disability in Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa but no studies of ASD in those without intellectual disability.

Fombonne (2009), observes that epidemiological studies are difficult to compare with since they vary in the composition of the population surveyed, design, awareness, participation rates, diagnostic criteria, instruments used as well as whether impairment criteria are included. Nevertheless, using the same methodology over a period of eight years, the Centre for Disease control (CDC Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network has found increasing rates of ASDs in the US.

Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders, is as per Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network 2000-2008 (combining data from all sites) Survey year, Year of birth Prevalence per 1,000 children (range) Frequency 2000 1992, 6.7(4.5–9.9)1/150, 2002 1994, 6.6(3.3–10.6)1/150, 2004 1996, 8.0(4.6–9.8)1/125, 2006 1998, 9.0(4.2–12.1)1/110, 2008 2000 11.3(4.8–21.2)1/88, Wing & potter (2002).

An estimated 1.5 million individuals in the United States and tens of millions worldwide are affected by autism spectrum disorders. Government statistics suggest the prevalence rate of autism is increasing 10-17 percent annually (Autism Speaks 100day kit, 2010).

More so, from the same day kit (2010), there is no established explanation for this increase, although improved diagnostic methods and environmental influences are two reasons often considered.

Baron-Cohen and Gillberg (1992), observed that professionals have a better understanding of autism spectrum disorders and its manifestations in early years and therefore diagnosis is being ascertained earlier than ever before. This view, however does not work for developing nations including Uganda. It remains a fact that ASD is a fairly new phenomenon in many developing countries. Accurate diagnosis, assessment and related services are still minimal making statistical data difficult to come by. This is supported by Sembatya, (2005), who says “that it is vitally important that more is done to educate communities about autism.

It should be noted that many children with autism continue to be confused with other intellectual disabilities as they display somewhat similar characteristics (Bakare & Munir, 2011), as well as limited research works relating to Autism Spectrum Disorders in Africa at present.

In Africa, cultural factors have recently been documented to influence characterization, diagnosis and treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder worldwide (Bernier, Mao & Yen, 2010). A study by Lotter (1978), cited by Bakare & Munir, (2011), in an attempt to establish the prevalence of autism in Africa, screened children with intellectual disabilities in nine major cities and found out that those who met the eligibility

criteria was one in 145. This implies that for any group of persons with autism picked at random; the likelihood of getting a person with autism is ratio 1:145 an estimate which is high.

There is lack of converging knowledge on the issue of prevalence disabling the harmonisation of statistics globally. The Government of Uganda, Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) policy on Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2011), while presenting data on special needs and inclusive education stated that the current situation regarding data collection in Special Needs and Inclusive Education (SN&IE) is challenging.

Bakare and Munir, (2011) observe that there is no study specifically addressing the epidemiology of ASD in Africa. This implies that there is a need to train professionals in assessment of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders who would identify them and give their exact figure.

In Uganda, it is estimated that there are approximately 130,000 children with autism spectrum disorders / aspergers syndrome children and one adult in every 235 (Kaleeba, 2011). Evidence from a Ugandan perspective indicates that children with autism are rarely recognised as a special group. According to the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy, all children including those with disabilities are expected to access free education. However, to date, there appears to be a limited number of autistic children that have been successfully mainstreamed in Uganda and scant research on the specific impacts, effects, perceptions, advantages and disadvantages of this process. There are a number of special schools in Kampala that have autistic learners but very few mainstream schools have such learners. Ugandan researchers are relying on research primarily from the United Kingdom and the United States of America to inform about the mainstreaming of autistic learners. There is an obvious urgent need for more studies on this phenomenon in Uganda to theoretically and practically provide information in order to create greater awareness among different stake holders in a bid to facilitate inclusion of autistic students within Ugandan schools.

Autism in Ugandan is affected by lack of existing fully fledged programmes that train professionals working with this new phenomenon thus there are limited sources of information to be used by all autistic children. Consequently, assessment is minimal leading to a demand for the development of programmes that train personnel in autism education. Analysis of Kyambogo University academic programs indicates that there is currently no specific program that focuses on assessment.

Uganda shillings to diagnose dyslexia and autism.” This implies that many children with autism have gone without assessment which limits the ways in which their needs would be addressed. In 1997, Uganda endorsed the Universal Primary Education policy and this is in line with the Education for All initiative. The projects expanded their target group from children with disabilities to include orphans, on ASD. Instead trainers are only exposed to aspects of ASD as a component of special needs.

Problem Statements

The problem statement highlights challenges in the assessment of learners with autism for placement in special schools in Kampala District, Uganda. Despite available opinions on assessing learners with autism and other disabilities, significant barriers hinder effective implementation. As noted by Nangozi (2015), there is only one expert conducting assessments at a screening center in Kyambogo University, charging 400,000 Ugandan Shillings, which limits access for many families. While Uganda has made progress in creating special schools for children with autism, only a few are government-funded.

Current policies lack functional assessment methods for early identification of learning needs upon school entry, and there are no formal policy guidelines to support schools in conducting such assessments (MoES, 2019). Despite having good policies regarding the education of learners with disabilities, Uganda lacks a specific policy for assessing learners with autism.

Data collection on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is also hampered by a shortage of trained professionals and cultural beliefs affecting identification and diagnosis (Bakare & Munir, 2011). Existing supporting documents, such as The Children’s Statute (1996) and the Educational Assessment Resource Services Act (EARS), emphasize the need for early assessment of children with disabilities. The Ministry of Education and

Sports (1997) mandates that special needs education staff ensure the enrollment and support of learners with special educational needs. However, the decentralization of services has integrated these supports into regular education, potentially leaving teachers without adequate guidance on assessment tools for learners with autism.

Research Objectives

The study sought to:

1. Analyze the tools teachers use to assess learning needs of learners with autism in educational programs.
2. Find out the challenges teachers face when using the tools to assess learning needs of learners with autism in educational programs

Research Questions

1. What assessment tools do classroom teachers use to assess the learning needs of learners with autism in educational programs?
2. What challenges teachers face when using the tools to assess the learning needs of learners with in educational programs?

Theoretical Framework

The Activity Theory, developed by Russian psychologists Vygotsky, Rubinshtein and Leontyev in the 1920s, formed the theoretical basis for this study. This social theory suggests that human behavior and consciousness are intimately linked to the activities in which individuals engage. The theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which activities are performed, the tools and objects used, and the social interactions that take place.

The major assumptions of activity theory are; Human behavior is a systematic process of engaging with objects and people to achieve a desired outcome, The theory highlights the significance of motivation and consciousness in shaping human behavior and decision-making, Activity Theory distinguishes between people, as subjects and objects, which are used to achieve a desired outcome, The theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions and relationships in shaping human behavior and decision-making.

This study applies the activity theory in three main ways; 1. The study explores the use of objects (tools) for assessing learners with ASD, highlighting the importance of understanding how learners interact with these tools and the social context in which they are used. 2. The study examines the process of how teachers apply assessment tools to learners with ASD, focusing on the conscious decisions made by teachers in relation to the activities and objects used. 3 The study investigated how teachers use assessment information to make conscious placement decisions for learners with ASD in educational programs, emphasizing the importance of social interactions and relationships in this process.

The major Weaknesses of activity theory were; Overemphasis on social context where the theory may overlook the individual characteristics and needs of learners with ASD, The theory's abstract nature can make it challenging to apply in practical settings, Activity Theory may not adequately address issues of power and agency in social interactions.

The major advantages of applying activity theory in this Study were; it provided a rich understanding of the social context in which learners with ASD interact with assessment tools and educational environments, The theory highlights the importance of conscious decision-making by teachers in relation to assessment and placement decisions and it emphasized the significance of social interactions and relationships in shaping human behavior and decision-making, which is particularly relevant in the context of ASD.

By applying the Activity Theory, this study aimed to deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between learners with ASD, assessment tools and social contexts, eventually informing more effective assessment and support practices for these learners.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study followed the qualitative case study design. A case study design involves describing the situation under study as it is by bringing out all the details in totality. It also allows for an intensive or in-depth investigation of the problem at hand and brings out a deeper understanding of the situation (Kombo & Tromp, 2006).

The use of case study approach entails the researcher using interview schedules, focused group discussions and observation schedules to give a detailed account where necessary for qualitative research. The case in the context of this study comprised of two schools for children with autism. Katrina (2012), observed that a descriptive design examines the current state of variables. For example, in the case of the present study the tools employed by teachers in assessment and placement of learners with autism in educational programmes.

The figure below illustrates how the data was collected.

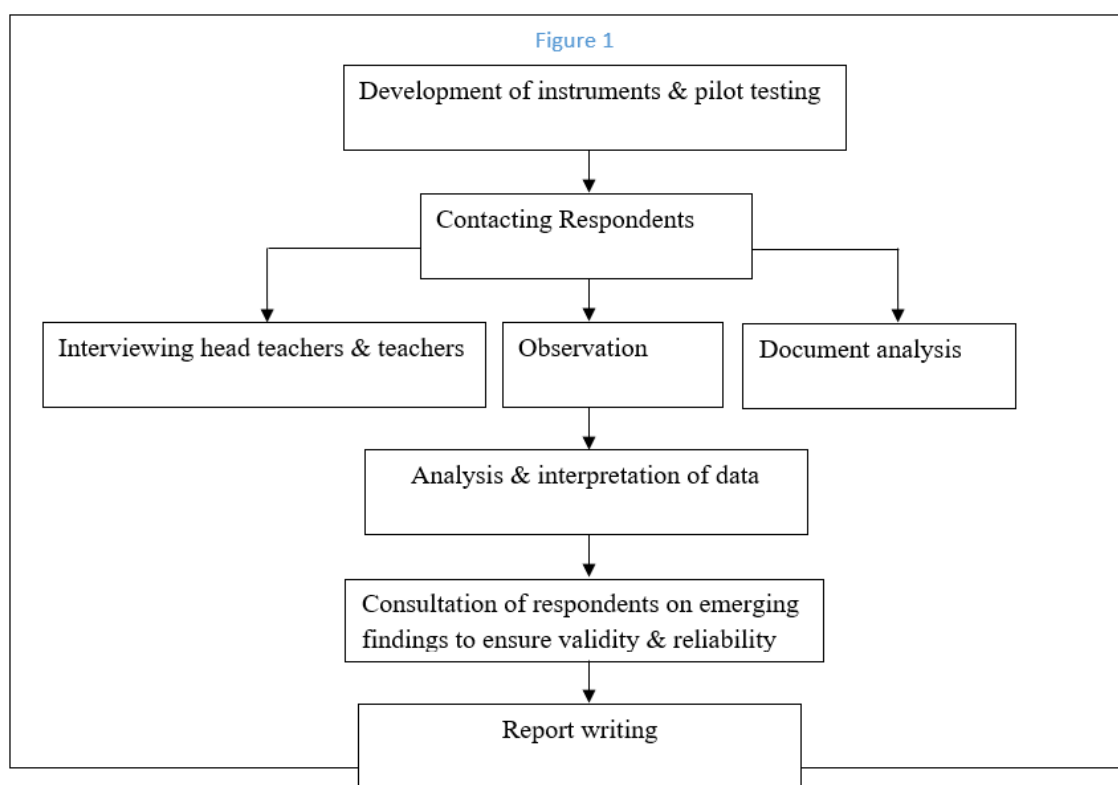


Figure 1. (Data Collection Process)

The illustration above shows how the process of data collection was carried out. Development of the process began with development of the instruments which included: interview guides, observation guides for the teachers, head teachers and focus group discussions. This was followed by contacting respondents through writing letters seeking permission and delivering them to the respondents physically. Interviews and observation were carried out interchangeably. Analysis and interpretation of data followed. Consultations where gaps remained were also made and lastly the final report writing.

Target Population

The target population for this study comprised of head-teachers and class teachers from 2 schools teaching and participating in carrying out assessment for learners with autism. These were selected because of their full participation in school assessment processes, administration, teaching, rehabilitation, welfare, curriculum and

policy making. School A had 12 teachers and the head teacher helped in selection of the 5 teachers following their capabilities and school B had 5 teachers and the Head teachers selected five of which she thought could give better information.

Sample Size

Table 1: The Sampling Frame

Category	Schools	No of teachers	Numbers of selected teachers	Head teachers	Sampling techniques	Head teachers selected
Special schools	Special school 1	12	5	1	purposive sampling.	1
	Special school 2	6	5	1	purposive sampling.	1
Total		18	10	2		2

Five teachers were selected from each school and the two head teachers from the selected schools were used.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique as observed by Cohen and Marion (1998) is where participants are sampled on the basis of their typicality or because they are satisfactory to the research needs. In this case, the head teacher and the teachers were purposively sampled because they are directly concerned with assessment in the two schools. Hence a total of 12 teachers were selected.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The four instruments; namely observation guide, interview guide, document analysis and focus group discussion were used for data collection. All instruments were developed by the research team based on the research questions generated. Each teacher and head teacher had one face to face interview which totalled to 12 interviews which were spread over a period of one month.

Focus group discussion (FGD) schedules were developed for the teachers who participated in the study and observation schedules, on learners reactions inside and outside the classroom. (See also appendix C).

In-depth Interview Guide

Interviews were conducted and guided by a common interview schedule. There was freedom to pursue interesting issues that emerged. The advantages of the semi-structured interviews is that they facilitate and build empathy as well as rapport between researcher and participant, allow a greater flexibility of coverage of topics and exploration of novel areas and have the potential to produce rich data (Smith, 1995). Three schedules were developed; face-to-face interview with head teachers and teachers and focus group discussion (See appendices A,B and C).The respondents for the interview included regular teachers, special teachers and head teachers dealing with children with autism. All the data gathered from the field was cleaned for accuracy, transcribed, organized into themes and analyzed.

Observation Checklists

The researcher used participant observation approach where the researcher recorded information on behaviours and reactions from learners with autism inside the classroom and outside the classroom. The observation guide for children with autism covered the observable behaviours of the child, care, and interactions related to the

child. It had also some collaboration with the information obtained from different sources of data. Observations were carried out on learners with autism and the teachers who participated in the assessment sessions. A checklist with a set items was employed in the observation (Appendix D). Field notes were generated from observation when the researcher made on spot notes of the behaviour by using a diary.

Document Analysis and Document Study

Data analysis involved scanning through: reports after assessments were analysed, (assessment reports, end of term report card, consent forms, and medical reports which the school provided.). Schemes of work were scanned through. The process involved reading through each report provided, highlighting the significant statements or issues, which was the text segments that contained comprehensive piece of information which was relevant to the research problem/questions. Four documents were studied which included; Medical questionnaire and checkup form, assessment form, an agreement between the parent and home for children with autism and admission form.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The data collection process commenced with securing necessary approvals from the Graduate School at Kenyatta University, the National Council for Science and Technology in Uganda, and the District Education Officer (DEO) for the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with head teachers and teachers at their convenience to provide an overview of the study's objectives and procedures.

Prior to the main research, meticulous logistical preparations were undertaken, including requesting funding from Kyambogo University, conducting a pilot study, and refining the data collection instruments. To ensure the integrity and confidentiality of the collected data, the researcher implemented secure storage measures, restricted access to the data to a designated supervisor, and responsibly disposed of all materials upon completion of the study. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were paramount, and special care was taken due to the sensitive nature of the research. Permission was sought to review confidential reports, and informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of the disadvantaged children involved in the study.

The researcher utilized observation schedules to assess the characteristics of learners who were eligible for autism labeling. An observation checklist was employed to evaluate how teachers assessed learners with autism in the classroom. Additionally, document analysis was conducted, wherein the researcher reviewed assessment tools and performance reports used by the school—this analysis was carried out alongside the interviews.

Focus group discussions were facilitated with a total of 10 teachers, organized into groups of five from different schools. The selected teachers were provided sufficient time to respond to the set questions, while the researcher assumed the role of facilitator to encourage open dialogue.

The data collection process spanned approximately two months and employed the developed tools, supplemented by ongoing note-taking throughout the research. To ensure accurate capture of qualitative data, the researcher utilized a tape recorder during interviews to document discussions effectively.

Data Analysis

According to Shamoo and Resnik (2003), data analysis involves the systematic application of statistical and logical techniques to describe, illustrate, condense, recap, and evaluate data. In the current study, the data was meticulously edited and coded in alignment with the themes arising from the research objectives and questions.

The raw data collected from the field was transcribed, cleaned, organized, coded, and categorized into distinct themes. These themes were derived directly from the participants' responses, which were recorded as raw data. The collected data was systematically organized into categories where it fit appropriately. The emergent

themes included: the tools teachers utilize for assessment, the materials employed for evaluating learners with autism, the challenges and limitations faced by teachers, and recommendations for improving assessment practices.

To facilitate understanding, the data was presented in simple tables and figures. Key statements were identified to support the primary findings. Large categories were synthesized from sub-categories and subsequently formed into overarching themes.

Qualitative data was primarily derived from open-ended questions included in the interview guides, as well as observations and focus group discussions. Additionally, document analysis provided narrative insights. The coded data was analyzed using qualitative techniques—such as interviews, observations, and document analysis—and was ultimately presented in a narrative format.

FINDINGS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

This study investigated the tools teachers use to assess learners with autism for to place them in educational programs. The table below shows the respondents response rate;

Table: 2 Respondents Category Response Rate.

Method of data collection	Number of responses	CODES
Observation	14	Tr1,Ht1,Tr3,Hd2,Tr2,Tr4,Tr5,Tr6,Tr8,Tr9,Tr10,Tr5,Tr2,Tr6,
Interviews	7	Tr3,Tr7,Tr1, Tr2,Tr4,Tr6,Tr3,
Informal oral tests	6	Tr4,Ht1,Tr2,Tr3,Tr2
Document analysis	1	Ht2
Total	28	

Source: primary data 2022: key Tr= teachers, Ht= Head teachers

In Table 2 above, four tools teachers used when assessing learners with autism for placement in educational programmes. A further analysis indicates that observation is the most frequently used tool, followed by interviews, informal testing and document analysis being the least tool teacher's use in the assessment of ASD. The above findings are supported by some direct quotations from respondents.

Interview Findings

One of the head teachers reported the following on the use of observation as an assessment tool for learners with ASD;

“Majority here it is observation and also apply elementally academics to assess a child for example we would draw a picture, give the child a crayon and see how the child goes about shading; whether the child is able to shade the boundaries of the pictures. The observations vary, because we begin from personality, how the child socializes with others and how the child interacts with the materials (Ht1)”(Head teacher Interview 2020)

Similarly, one teacher argued that;

“We observe the kids and we give them some materials and attractive colours and see what they are doing” tr3. (Teacher Interview 2020)

Another teacher said;

“We use question and answer, we also observe the kids, we give them some material to play with attractive colour, we interview the parents, we do it as a group; one is asking questions, one is writing, another one is with the kid (Ht6 2020)”.

The results show that observation cannot be done in isolation from other things within the environment. Teachers use materials in the classroom while assessing learners with autism for appropriate placement in the educational programmes. By implication, any material found in the environment could be used to assess a learner with autism within the classroom through observation to establish the child's strength and weakness. This is in line with what Njuki (2013), said “assessment tools could be anything within the environment”.

During informal talks, a teacher narrated that they observe the children mainly in the classroom on daily basis because the parents conceal some information concerning the child when they first bring them to school. And the teachers added that, after staying with the child for a longer period, they discovered some habits which they were not told upon receiving the child.

In many instances teachers tell the strength and weakness of the learners through watching them during an activity. Teachers may decide to promote or demote the learner depending on what they have observed from the activity performed by the child. Later observation assists in placement or referrals to educational programmes.

Observation usually reveals the real behaviours of the child which the parents or the caregivers might not have noticed. Parents sometimes give the teacher information which they feel will not bring them shame. They think that if they say the truth, the teachers would refuse to admit their children. When the parents lie about their children, they think the teachers will not find out. Hence, if the teachers had known the child's problem, they would have planned appropriate interventions for the child. Teachers mainly use observation when assessing the learners with autism as a supplement to what the learners' parents had said. The majority of teachers believed that children with autism do not speak and using other methods to assess them may confuse them. So the teachers' resorts to providing materials to the children to enable them to observe the children interact with the materials. The quotations to support the findings, interpretations and discussions are presented as one teacher confirmed;

“In observation we begin with the personality, how does the child socialize with others, how does the child interact with the play materials, how does the child respond to certain stimuli.”Ht 1.2020

While another one said

:“We use observation method, since children with autism do not have speech and they don't face you directly” tr42020.

And another one echoed

“We have no specific tool to use when we are assessing learners with autism, you can learn and observe, you can see and learn that a child with autism may behave like this” tr10.2020

The results show that learners with autism have a problem with communication, which prevents them from being engaged in in-depth interviews. Teachers, during the assessment process, use observation to gather information about the learners.

The researchers intended to observe how teachers assess the weakness and strength of the children's personal hygiene. The skill chosen was to brush the teeth. While in the classroom, the researcher observed that the teachers used materials found in the classroom. The materials included: building blocks, colours, balls, toy cars, tooth brush, tooth paste and basins to mention but a few to do the assessment. Using observation, as a method of gathering information, the researcher watched a lesson where teachers were conducting brushing of teeth. The lesson was conducted after break as it was indicated on the timetable. The teachers brought water,

tooth brush, basins and tooth paste as teaching aids. The lesson was conducted by two teachers and it had seven learners. The lesson was conducted in class though it would have been more appropriate outside the classroom. When the researcher asked why the teachers conducted the lesson in classroom, the teachers said the children are unruly and would run away if they are outside.

Both teachers participated in brushing the children's teeth, some children were able to brush themselves with minimal assistance while others needed assistance. Teachers used the time of instructions to observe the children and get to know their likes and dislikes, capabilities and inabilities. The teachers then grouped the children based on their capabilities. One teacher was dealing with the more capable group while another one was dealing with the less able group. The level of capability was based on ability to brush teeth without teacher's assistance. When the activity was over, teachers collected the materials which were used and washed them, packed them and put them away. Thereafter, the teachers allowed the children to proceed for a break and remained behind to note down the level of each child while consulting with each other. Many children with autism do not talk so the teachers employed demonstration. The researcher also observed that some of the tooth brushes which the children used were factory made, while other tooth used were improvised from trees as sticks. This indicated that, any material within the environment can serve as an assessment tool and no specific material is for assessment. In the absence of harmonized assessment tools for schools, teachers devise other means of gathering information. This implies that learners with autism where being assessed need flexibility in their instructions. The schools claimed to have developed their own tools. This is in relation to what Njuki (2013) states: "assessment tools are the way we collect information about a person with a particular condition". He mentions some example of the tools to include tests, checklists, rating scale and examinations or special equipment. This implies that teachers had a clue on using special tools.

The study observed that if one fails to observe what the children with autism do daily, they would fail to place them appropriately, but when one observes critically, one would be able to identify what interventions are appropriate.

Other children with intellectual disabilities are mistaken to have similar characteristics to those with autistic children in schools. This meant that teachers need to know the best way of assessing learners with autism so that they are identified from those with other intellectual disabilities. One of the effective ways of carrying out effective assessment of children with autism is to study the child's characteristics. This is in line with what Kaleeba (2007) said; awareness of autism has increased globally, but developing countries like Uganda still lag behind in being able to fully understand the nature of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), its etiology and providing appropriate interventions including assessment and placement. Teachers use different ways of assessing learners with autism though without a harmonized tool. One of the teachers expressed concern that there are no specific tools used when assessing learners with autism and she added that in most of the schools, the head teachers are final decision makers. Sometimes when an assessment is done at school, it is the head teachers who give the final word. While other teachers lack skills in assessment, there should be someone in the school at least who is at least familiar with them. A teacher commented:

"It is the head teacher who does the assessment, we look at the ways of behaviour, and how they treat each other and see how he does things. The background is got from the head teacher." tr 2 2020

The study found out that head teachers manage the placement of learners with autism in educational programmes. When the children are brought for assessment, parents first interact with the head teacher in the office. By the time the child faces the assessment committee, the head teachers have decided whether to take on the child or not. When the teachers look at a few things that may indicate autism tendencies, the head teacher already has the background information to base on while admitting the child. Teachers reported that many parents come for assessment with the view that their children are autistic even before the children are assessed. Riley (2003) concurs with the statement by noting that there are no medical tests that can be performed to indicate the presence of ASD. Instead the diagnosis is based upon the presence or absence of behaviour that is diagnosed based on the range of features a child displays. Mainly in societies children are labeled before they are assessed. Some people who have seen children deviating from expectations of the society may associate the children's behaviour with those of the autistic ones and label autism automatically yet some may not be autistic. Parents do not wait for assessment, rather they just label the child autistic. The

study further revealed that no specific assessment tools are available for use in assessment in the schools. The only used materials are those within the classroom and observation to gather information. Observation according to Njuki (2013) is the process of watching and recording what a person does and it has two ways namely; participant and non-participant. He adds that participant observation means the activities that a person is engaged while non-participant observation is when the observer watches and records what the person being assessed is doing without participating. The study revealed that teachers of children with autism continuously observe them. One teacher said:

“We use observation method, since children with autism do not have speech and they don’t face you directly. Others are continuous assessment and discussion. Tr 4.while another one said: “We involve them in activities, looking at their behaviours”tr 6

This is in line with CARS an assessment tool and TEACCH approach which aims at formalizing observations of the child's behaviour throughout the day (Schopler, Reichler, & Renner, 1988). Although there are already existing tools such as CARS used in assessment, teachers still claim that they do not know how to assess the children more especially those who do not have speech. This may hinder the teacher from assessing or from knowing what the child is communicating and forces the assessor to be more watchful if she /he may get the results which are fruitful and useful. The view of one of the teachers was:

“Most of our children lack speech as you will see, in most cases teachers try to relate to guess what the child is trying to communicate” Ht1. Therefore, there is need for the teachers to be introduced to the existing tools so as to do assessment efficiently.

The head teacher expressed concern that the autistic children are not easy to assess because even if you want to understand what their strength and needs are, they cannot express it verbally. This makes the teachers resort to guess work in order to come up with what the child's needs are. This implies that the teachers at times may label the children autistic even when they have a different kind of intellectual disability. Although, there has been training of teachers in assessing learners with special needs as a component for a diploma and degree for the Universities, there is a great need in training teachers on how to use the existing tools in assessment such as ABC, GARs, and CARs.

The teachers used in the study claim to have knowledge of almost all categories of learners with special needs including visual impairment, hearing impairment and intellectual disabilities. From the informal talks, the researcher had with the teachers; it was found out that most of children they have in their classrooms have had intellectual disabilities but are out sported. A few who were more difficult in their classes were not settling, holding things in their hands all the time and other characteristics which were not said. One or two were autistic in the class but as the teachers had problems of sporting the child with autism from other categories of children with intellectual disabilities they thought that all the others had autism. The learners with autism had some differences and many similarities as other children with intellectual disabilities. This brings confusion in the way of labeling the autistic learners appropriately. The teachers were not certain in their identification. They requested the researcher to do the assessment so that they would use it as a base to make better interventions. This is in support of what The Ministry of education and family development (2013) of Ghana says: that Autism Spectrum Disorders is a complex neurobiological condition that impacts brain development and affects a person's social relationships, communication, interests and behaviour. This brings confusion in the way learners with autism are differentiated and branded from those with other forms of intellectual disabilities hence misplacement.

The majority of the teachers lack the skills of assessment though the schools have developed a checklist to use during assessment. They feel that there is need to have a harmonized one. In one of the group discussions one teacher said,

“Why don’t we together with all other teachers from other schools for children with autism, sit down and look for things we have in common, and those which we have and they are different, compile them. Then we sit down and look at them one by one deleting what is not relevant and adding what we think is relevant so that we come up with one which will act as a harmonized tool. ”ht 2

The results revealed that teachers have tools they use during the assessment process though they are not harmonized. Each school has developed its own assessment tool. This concurs with what Hepburn, Kaiser and Graham (2015) said that “present time there is no medical test for ASD and the only available way to determine if the child has ASD is to look for patterns or gaps or unevenness in the development of social interaction, communication and restricted patterns of activities and interests relative to a child’s overall development”. Therefore, the teachers should collaborate with other teachers, come up with what they have and compare the two to develop a harmonized tool for assessment.

In conclusion, the views contributed by the teachers show that there is need to develop a tool which may be used by the teachers when assessing specific learners with autism and separate them from other learners having developmental disabilities. The researcher noted that majority of the teachers used observation but with no stipulated procedures. Secondly, it should be made known to the teachers that there are already available standardized tools used to assess learners with autism in other countries. It should also be noted that the standardized tools used in other countries were developed, tested and retested and now the teachers are conversant in using them. So in Uganda, there is need to develop our tools which are applicable to our environment and to the needs of the children. Despite ASD being a medical condition and therefore a scientific condition whose assessment may not differ much internationally, Ugandans need to look at what other countries are using and adapt them to Ugandan situation.

The discussions reveal key insights into the assessment practices for learners with autism, focusing on the roles of interviews, observations, and parental involvement.

Findings From Interviews on Assessment Tools and Practices

According to Institutional Research, Assessment and Effectiveness (2000), effective assessment requires a complete set of documents and varied instruments such as observation, checklists, and questioning. Interviews, in particular, are frequently utilized by teachers for assessing learners with autism, with a reported frequency of seven out of 28 instances.

Role of Interviews

Interviews are often organized in schools to determine the appropriate educational placement for students. Given that many learners with autism may have difficulties communicating verbally or in writing, parents typically conduct these interviews on their children's behalf.

Standardized international tools like the ASIEP-3 and the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) are recognized for their efficacy, but teachers in Uganda often lack training in their use.

Parental Involvement

Parents and caregivers are integral to the assessment process, as they can offer valuable insights into the child's developmental history and current needs. Teachers often initiate discussions with parents about the child's milestones and unique aspects of their development.

Quotations from teachers highlight the collaborative nature of assessments, indicating that head teachers often gather information before passing it on to teachers for further action.

Collaborative Approach

The findings underscore the necessity of collaboration between parents, teachers, and head teachers. Parent input is essential for a comprehensive evaluation of the child's potential, aligning with Gallagher's (1992) assertion that family members are vital parts of the educational team. This collaborative approach helps ensure that assessments are well-rounded and informative.

Gathering Information:

Observations and ongoing interactions with both the child and their parents provide a wealth of information that aids in appropriate program placement.

Effective assessment is demonstrated through varied methods, including one-on-one interactions with children and continuous engagement to gather detailed insights from parents.

Challenges and Recommendations

The discussions mention the complexities of assessing children with autism due to their unique behavioral characteristics and needs. As per the CDC (2008), these individuals may show significantly different behaviors, necessitating individualized approaches.

Teachers should be equipped with strategies to minimize distractions for children during assessments, ensuring both children and parents can focus effectively on the process.

Importance of Preparation

Thorough preparation is crucial given the challenges of assessing children with autism. A multi-disciplinary team approach, including educational psychologists, is recommended for comprehensive support.

In conclusion, the findings from these focus group discussions emphasize the essential role of collaborative assessment involving parents and various educational professionals, as well as the need for skill development in utilizing international assessment tools effectively.

Informal Oral Testing

Informal oral testing refers to gathering information about the child through talking to him/or her and as well as assessing the strength and needs.

Informal talks are important tools presented by a frequency of six over 37. This tool was mentioned by the teachers as one of those used during assessment where they did not need to make major preparation for the assessment but they did it with the child on receipt without exposing the child to unnecessary stress. Kaleeba (2006), notes that a parent of a child with autism always informs other stake holders on how best to handle his/her child.. She further argues that, since the word “spectrum” is used with people with autism because they share three main areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in very different ways. While some are able to solve their problems, others require a life time of specialist support. This helps the teachers to understand that besides their support, a child also requires a specialist to look into other problems to enable proper placement in the educational programmes. The information gathered is very important because the informants are neither stressed nor on tension which enables them to yield true information.

The informal oral testing as a tool was highlighted by the following quotations:

“We start by asking the parents how the child was during gestation period”.Tr1.

This helps the teacher to predict some of the possible causes of the present problems and to assist in guidance and counselling.

Findings From Document Analysis

Document analysis emerged as one of the lesser-utilized assessment tools among teachers. During the assessment process, teachers primarily rely on a medical form that provides critical information regarding each child. A careful review of the medical documents revealed details that teachers might overlook if they solely conducted the assessments themselves. This underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to

assessment, as highlighted by Jordan and Powell (2002), who noted the challenges in defining Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) due to its association with various developmental issues.

The analysis included six key documents:

1. Admission Forms – encompassing assessment questions and results.
2. Medical Form – distributed to parents for re-assessment at healthcare facilities.
3. Agreement Form – signed by parents, indicating their commitment to their child's requirements.
4. Admission Form with Assessment Information – containing essential details about the child and the assessment conducted.
5. Educational Needs Assessment Progressive Report – detailing the child's progress throughout the term.
6. Assessment Report Card – summarizing the child's achievements and developmental milestones.

While no specific forms designed exclusively for assessing learners with autism were present, teachers had devised assessment questions that guided their evaluations. Some documents, such as the Admission and Medical Forms, were completed by healthcare professionals. Teachers then compile these forms from parents of children with autism to identify the areas of concern regarding the child's development.

Support for the importance of comprehensive assessment tools is articulated in the report by the Institutional Research, Assessment, and Effectiveness (2000). It states that effective assessment tools comprise a complete set of documents necessary for evaluating one or more educational units. Each tool should incorporate various instruments, including methods for observation, checklists, and questioning, alongside guidelines for administration, recording, and reporting. Furthermore, it outlines the contexts and conditions under which assessments are conducted.

The fourth document highlighted the medical background of the child, confirming that a medical professional had evaluated their condition. However, it was clear that medical assessments alone do not fully address the child's educational needs.

One teacher noted, *"The children come when they are already diagnosed; I read through the forms and gauge whether to take on the child or not."*

Typically, teachers of children with disabilities express concerns regarding the health status of these children and, as a precaution, often request medical forms to ascertain if any medication needs to be administered.

In summary, teachers currently lack specific assessment tools tailored for this demographic. Instead, they rely on a combination of observational methods, interviews, informal discussions, and document analysis. This document analysis indicates that observation is a prevalent method for data collection among teachers as they assess children's needs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined the assessment tools used by teachers on learners with autism in special educational schools in Kampala District in Uganda. The findings reveal that teachers lack specific tools for assessing learners with autism, relying on observation, interviews and limited documentation. There is a need for a harmonized assessment tool to be developed and implemented nationwide.

The study concluded that there are limited resources available for teachers to use during assessment and placement of learners with autism in special education programs in schools and the information obtained from assessments mainly focuses on improving instruction and proper placement of learners with autism in educational programs. It is essential for teachers to plan for training on autism education and assessment skills to address the identified challenges.

Recommendations

Tools Used for Assessment of Learning Needs of Learners with Autism

1. **Harmonized Assessment Tool:** Develop and implement a standardized assessment tool across all schools in Uganda to ensure consistency and equity in the assessment process.
2. **Professional Evaluation Team:** Establish a team of professionals to evaluate and approve assessment tools suitable for learners with autism spectrum disorders in all sectors, including schools.
3. **Training on Assessment Tools:** Organize seminars to educate teachers on the effective use of assessment tools and help them develop a harmonized assessment tool.

Areas For Further Research

1. **Assessment Materials:** Conduct extensive research on materials used when assessing learners with Autism Spectrum disorders to address the challenges faced by teachers.
2. **Teacher Competency:** Further research is needed to bridge the gap between teacher competencies in autism education and assessment strategies.

Recommendations for Improvement in Assessment

1. **Development of Harmonized Tool:** Teachers should develop a harmonized assessment tool to be used in schools for placement.
2. **Systematic Procedures:** Establish systematic procedures for assessment to ensure consistency and fairness.
3. **Record-Keeping System:** Develop a system for recording assessment results for easy referencing.
4. **Training Curriculum:** Develop and implement a training curriculum for teachers on autism education and assessment skills in faculty of special needs and rehabilitation.
5. **Assessment Centre:** Establish an Assessment Centre to facilitate the assessment of learners with autism and serve as a role model for other teachers.
6. **Legislations and Policies:** Formulate specific legislations and policies on the assessment of learners with autism.

Implementation of Recommendations

- The findings of this study should inform policy and further research on autism spectrum disorder, educational placement, and assessment strategies.
- Stakeholders, including the government, schools, and teacher training institutions, should work together to implement these recommendations and improve the assessment of learners with autism in Uganda.
- Public dialogue involving different stakeholders to harmonize and understand autism in context of Uganda.

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