

Assessing Pre-school Teachers Knowledge and Utilisation of Observational Assessment Tools in Preschool: Implication for Higher Education

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Abstract

The assessment of pre-school children's performance has become a central focus of efforts to reform education as it is observed that teachers' assessment practices focused mainly on x children's cognitive domain making use of standardised instruments. The study assessed pre-school teachers' knowledge and utilisation of observational assessment tools in pre-school and their implication for higher education. The research design for this study was descriptive survey design with a total of 80 pre-school teachers and 50 lecturers of higher education as the population of the study. Three research questions were answered. The data collected was analysed using mean and standard deviation analysis. The result showed that pre-school teacher level of knowledge of observational assessment tools was moderate ($\bar{x} = 12.05$; $SD = 3.01$), the level of pre-school teachers utilisation of observational tools were high ($\bar{x} = 60.60$; $SD = 6.53$) while lecturers' utilisation of observational tool was high ($\bar{x} = 40.52$; $SD = 10.16$). Based on the results of findings from the study it is recommended that lecturers teaching the pre-school teachers should desist from lecturing them instead of teaching them and also encourage them to utilise Observational Assessment tools instead of the stringent conventional cognitive assessment methods. Government should enact policies that will not be in a variance with global views. Pre-school teachers should also ensure that they record all observations and activities that take place during the Childrens' stay at school by making use of available Observational Assessment tools such as the Anecdotal record.

Keywords: Knowledge, Utilisation, Observational assessment, Tools, Pre-school

Introduction

In Nigeria schools, learners at every level of education (primary, secondary and higher education) are always subjected to one form of assessment practice or the other during the course of their learning. This practice does not exclude pre-school aged children as observed by Oputa-Onwusa (2014). The preschool years according to Kostelnik, Soderman and Whiren (2007) and Ibiam and Ugwu, (2009) are the most sensitive and vulnerable years of any individual's life. Their findings submit that, it is during these years that children begin to develop a wide range of skills across all domains of development, attitude towards themselves and also determine their conceptions of education and learning.

At the World Conference on Education for All (EFA), it was recognised that the capacity for lifelong learning rests on the foundation established in the first years of life. This was further reinforced and expressed in the first of the six Education for All goals adopted by 164 countries in Dakar in April 2000, UNESCO, 2006. Heckman and Masterou 2007, opine that failure to develop these foundation skills can lead to long term effects on children's educational attainment.

One of the most effective ways of ensuring that these irreversible effects are eliminated once they appear and thus prevent problems later in life is for teachers to frequently conduct assessment of students across all domains of development. Assessment according to Nutbrown 2006 and Calveric 2010 is the process of identifying the details of children's knowledge, understanding and skills in order to build a comprehensive picture of their development and learning needs and obtaining information about student's progress, strength and weaknesses. It involves practitioners documenting, analysis and reflecting on the information collected to plan and support further learning.

Observational tools provide a systematic set of procedures and conceptual frames to evaluate the incidence and quality of specific evidence by assigning scores to interactions within a learning setting, Gitomer, D.H., and Bell, C.A., 2013. According to them, evidence goes beyond the explicit interactions between teachers and learners, it includes indices such as instructional artifacts and documentation around planning and analysis of the observed interactions among others. This is especially important for formal classroom settings usually based on the quality of

both the setting and the teacher, other contextual factors include the curriculum, school policies and the students themselves that can affect the quality of interactions in the classroom.

Teachers have been identified as the key operators of the actual education experience and assessment is the means through which learning that occurs from such a process is enhanced, observed and defined. Three methods have been used to investigate teachers' assessment practices as well as their levels of preparation to assess students' learning. They are surveys of teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practices, tests of assessment knowledge and finally review of teachers' actual assessment, Brookhart, 2001. Regardless of what methods have been used, teachers' assessment skills are described as being generally weak, Campbell, Murphy & Holt, 2000. Stiggins, 1991 and Stiggins, 2002 is in agreement when they state that we are seeing unacceptably low levels of assessment literacy among practicing teachers and administrators. He continues further by saying that this assessment illiteracy has resulted in inaccurate assessment of student's causing them to fail to meet their potential. Given this scenario, the quality of education in any system whose teachers are not effective at utilising assessment as a partner in ensuring and maximising learning in classrooms is bound to suffer. It is therefore important to identify and improve upon the key factors that affect and shape teachers assessment practices.

Teachers, according to McMillan 2002, incorporate multiple assessment types into their instructions and they are not expected to rely on a single source of information. Assessment types they say range from formal, objective testing techniques such as; teacher made tests, standardised tests, homework to more informal "On-the-spot" assessments such as student behavior, perceived student efforts, teacher expectation, informal observation interaction cues. To supplement their formal assessments, teachers use published texts, including texts provided by curriculum publishers, standardised tests and most times self-developed tests, Cizek, 1996. These forms describe the occurrence of assessments and do not include observational assessments that are integral to overall assessment practices.

Research findings have attested to the fact that observational tools are receiving broad attention as measures of gauging the quality of interactions within formal educational settings according to Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation 2012 in the work of Gitomer, Bell, Daniel, Hamre, Bridget, Pianta, Robert, Qi, McCaffrey, 2012. In recent years, the assessment of children's performance has become a central focus of efforts to reform education, Cizek, 1997. However, there has been a shift in the ways teachers carry out their assessment. Achievement and ability were assessed using paper and pencil methods, designed to measure different cognitive abilities, determine achievement and measure knowledge as requirements for success in school. Jamal, 2008.

During the 1980's emerging literature provided little evidence on how classroom assessments are related to teaching or learning, McMillan, Workmen, James, Myran, Steve & Daryl 1999. A cursory look at preschool generally revealed that the same assessment practices being used for older learners and higher education students are also being used with preschool children with majority of preschool teachers' heavy reliance on standardised testing and the use of paper and pencil activities.

Biggs 2003 in agreement with the 'Tuning Project' subject group discussion on good practices in teaching and learning assessment describes it as 'alignment'. He further stated that in order for students to reach the intended learning outcomes, teaching learning activities and assessment need to be organised. Standardised testing has been faulted by experts who are of the opinion that these processes (tests) do not provide accurate picture of what children know but what they know at a particular time.

Observational assessment involves observing children's skills and abilities in natural, non-threatening environments and providing a more realistic understanding of what young children know and can do in their everyday life. Therefore, it implies that preschool teachers are expected to be competent in a variety of areas, especially in the observational skills since assessment is directly linked to all other functions teachers perform. The relatively sparse information available on teachers' informal assessment practices and the value they place on them is a gap that this study investigated. Also, it has been noticed that there is scarce research

on the relevance of teachers' knowledge and utilisation of the appropriate assessment tools for pre-school teachers in Nigeria with the major aim of achieving positive learning outcomes. The purpose of this study is assessing preschool teachers' knowledge and utilisation of observational assessment tools in preschool: implication for higher education.

Research Questions

The study answered the following research questions:

1. What is the level of preschool teachers' knowledge of observational assessment?
2. What is the level of preschool teachers' utilisation of observational assessment?
3. What is the level of lecturers' utilisation of observational tools?

Method

Research Design

The research design for this study is descriptive survey design.

Sampling Technique

Two sampling techniques have been used to select the participants for this study and they are simple random sampling technique and the purposive sampling technique. Lagos state is divided into Mainland and Island. Mainland is further divided into Local governments and four registered schools were selected from Yaba and Ikeja local Government Areas. Two schools each were selected from the two Local Government Areas. The criteria for being selected were that the teachers had to volunteer to be part of the study from the beginning of the study to the end and they also signed consent forms to that effect.

Population of the study

The research respondents for this study were 80 preschool teachers and 50 lecturers of higher institution. They formed the population of the study. Twenty teachers were selected from each school. The 50 lecturers were chosen from Faculty of Education of two universities in Nigeria.

Research Instrument

Three research instruments were used for this study and they are: Test on pre-school teachers' knowledge of observational assessment tools, it was designed to test their knowledge of assessment, formal and informal assessment, assessment tools.

Observational rating scale on pre-school teachers' utilisation of observational tool was designed by the researchers to measure the level of utilisation of observational tools among the pre-school teachers through classroom observation schedule developed by the researchers. Observational rating scale on lecturers' utilisation of observational assessment tools measured the rate at which the items were used.

The three instruments were duly validated and their reliability Cronbach alpha were 0.58, 0.65 and 0.64 respectively.

Results and Discussion

The results of the findings are presented according to how the research questions are stated.

Research Question One

What is the level of preschool teachers' knowledge of observational assessment tools?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Knowledge of Observational Assessment

Variable	N	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	SD
Teachers' Knowledge	80	8.00	17.00	12.05	3.01

Low level: 0.00 – 6.67 Moderate: 6.68-13.34 High Level: 13.35 – 20.00

The result of the study showed that pre-school teachers had moderate knowledge of observational assessment. The findings of this study does not agree with the findings of Campbell et al 2000 that state that teachers' assessment skills are generally weak. Stiggins 2001 observed that there are unacceptably low level of assessment of literacy among practicing teachers and administrators which has resulted in

inaccurate assessment of learning causing them to fail to meet their potentials. However, the result of this study has shown that there has been improvement in pre-school teachers' knowledge of observational assessment especially in Nigeria ($\bar{x} = 12.05$, $SD = 3.01$).

Research Question 2

What is the level of pre-school teachers' utilisation of observational tools?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Pre-school Teachers' Utilisation of Observational Tools

Variable	N	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	SD
Teachers' Utilisation	80	51.00	75.00	60.60	6.53

Low level: 0.00 – 6.67 Moderate: 6.68-13.34 High Level: 13.35 – 20.00

Preschool teachers utilisation of observational tools as shown in Table 2 in this study was at a high level ($\bar{x} = 60.60$, $SD = 6.53$). The minimum score for pre-school teachers' utilisation of observational tools was 51.00 while the maximum score was 75.00. The result implied that pre-school teachers are quite disposed to the concept of assessment. According to Cizek 1996, teacher commonly use formal objective assessments to measure content knowledge, typically in terms of factual recall other than rote learning activities.

Macmillan 2002, however, opined that teachers also employ a combination of formal objective assessment and informal observational assessment. The result is in agreement with Macmillan findings that the combination of different tools preschool teachers use has increased their level of utilisation of observational tools.

Research Question Three

What is the level of lecturers' utilisation of Observational Tools

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Knowledge of Observational Assessment

Variable	N	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	SD
Teachers' Knowledge	80	8.00	17.00	12.05	3.01

Low level: 0.00 – 6.67 Moderate: 6.68-13.34 High Level: 13.35 – 20.00

Lecturers' level of utilisation of observational tools from Table 3 was at a high level (= 40.52, SD = 10.16). The minimum score for lecturers' utilisation of observational tool was 132 while the maximum score was 1174. The result implies that lecturers do engage various forms of assessment observational tools in the course of their teaching and learning activities.

Conclusion

The study focus on assessing the knowledge and utilisation of observational assessment tools in preschool education in Nigeria and their implication for higher education. It was found out that preschool teachers had adequate knowledge of observational assessment tools. This is due to the fact that the conventional methods of assessment are gradually fading away as a result of the effect of globalisation, additional qualification which was found out by the researchers through unstructured interview and opportunities given to them to attend workshops, seminars and conferences during the time of upgrading themselves and government's organised programm as part of staff development programs. All these have brought a lot of exposure to them.

The extent of preschool teachers' level of utilisation of observational tools were found to be high. This implied that preschool teachers are quite exposed to the utilisation of Observational assessment method. They employ a combination of various assessment tools to achieve their learning outcome. The result in table three above indicates also that lecturers' level of utilisation of observational tools was at a high level when put to use in the course of teaching and learning activities.

Recommendations

- Based on the findings from the study, the government's policy on the method of assessment for these kind of learners should comply with the global view. Government should further keep the window of staff development widely opened, making in-service training and attendance of workshops, seminars compulsory so that teachers can keep abreast of current trends in the developed world.
- Preschool teachers should ensure that whatever observational assessment tools utilised be accurately documented and recorded for future references during assessment procedure.
- Finally, lecturers teaching preschool teachers should pay more attention on the student teachers by teaching them rather than lecture them, this is because, they will definitely give back to the recipients (preschool) during practice whatever they were given. They should further encourage the intending teachers and those on in-service programme of the need to utilise observational assessment tools in assessing their student rather than the conventional cognitive assessment tool.

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