



USE OF DEVELOPMENTAL CHECKLIST IN TEACHING AND LEARNING AT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT LEVEL IN MAUN BOTSWANA

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ABSTRACT

Children's assessment needs considerably selected formal and informal methodologies that measure specific features over several selected periods of time and in many different settings. The focus of the paper was to establish opportunities and challenges in the employment of the developmental checklist on how assessment can promote development and learning at the Early Childhood Development (ECD) level (3-5 years). The study applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) ecological model to gain an improved understanding of the interaction between factors in children's biological, their immediate family/community environment and societal landscapes that stimulate and guide their development. A qualitative research approach and a case study design guided the process of this study. Interviews, observation, and document analysis were the tools used to collect data. Five Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in Maun were randomly selected to be part of this study. Collected data were qualitatively presented, analyzed, and interpreted for the purposes of making informed decisions. Findings established that opportunities for assessment using the developmental checklist focus mainly on growth and development, rather than meeting predestined criteria or score that labels the learner as competent or incompetent. Also revealed by the study is that most educators focus on the result rather than the process and that, a lack of intervention strategies based on observation can deter progress. From the findings, it can be concluded that the use of a developmental checklist tool promotes learning and development in young children. The study, therefore, recommends that appropriate use of a developmental checklist in a well-prepared environment can cater for individual differences while at the same time promoting learning.

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1. Background to the study

Assessment of young children is one of the critical elements in their development (Brewer, 2007). Current assessment tools reveal that young children develop steadily at different rates as per their individual growth and development (Leonard, 1997). The Early Childhood Development programme is designed to form the foundation for the education and development of children. Thus, the foundation provides teachers and children with an opportunity to develop and build on the skills necessary for growth. Such windows of opportunity place the teacher or caregiver in the right direction towards assessment of young children as they grow and develop. This research paper, therefore, was targeted at exploring opportunities and challenges in the use of the developmental checklist in teaching and learning at the ECD level.

Worldwide young children are the future of every nation. Bernard van Leer Foundation (2004:3) posit that "what happens to children in their first days, months and years of life affects

their development, the development of the society and the world. A lot of attention has been channelled to the field of ECD, hence the augmented attention it has received in recent years, globally, urbanization, changing economic circumstances, migration and adjustments to the family structure have resulted in greater acknowledgement of formal early childhood care and education as a realistic alternative to home-based caregiving” (Are, 2007; Bowes, Watson and Pearson, 2008, in Pearson and Degotardi, 2000:99).

Research studies conclude that ECD has the potential to promote change and enhance the lives of communities on a global scale. The Organization for African Unity (2001:6) concurs that “the future of Africa lies with the well-being of its children and youth”. This organization furthermore acknowledges that socio-economic transformation and growth rest with investment in the young people of the continent. “Today’s investment in children is tomorrow’s peace, stability, security, democracy, and sustainable development” (Pan-African Forum for Children, 2001). In the same view, Aidoo (2008) upholds that, ECD is the foundation of human development whereby a focus on the young child and the whole ECD provides an opportunity for sustainable human development, economic growth, social change, and transformation in Africa.

Universal provision of formal early childhood services has also been promoted via international organizations that view the early years as formative in terms of later development and learning (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1990). These developments have stimulated global interest in the provision of early childhood services and the goal of achieving positive outcomes for young children. In support, Kaga (2007) agrees that education equips children with values and basic skills that allow them to critically reflect and make informed decisions about issues and courses of action. Kaga further says that by equipping young children with important life and learning skills, ECD has the potential to promote change and enhance the lives of communities on a global scale.

Schoeman (2005:275) additionally, accredits a specific responsibility to ECD programmes whilst maintaining that they bear a special and historic responsibility for the development of civic competency and responsibility. Aidoo (2008) agrees when asserting that countries need to develop ECE policies that will guide strategic decision-making and resource allocation. Assessment of children in the early years is a vital and growing component of high-quality early childhood programmes. It is not only an imperative instrument in understanding and supporting

young children's development but also essential to documenting and weighing programme efficiency (Brewer, 2007). For effectiveness purposes, assessment must employ methods that are realistic, viable and balanced regarding demands on budgets, educators, parents, and children. (Helm, Banneker & Steinheimer 1998). Furthermore, it is of crucial importance that assessment at this stage meets the challenging demands of accuracy and effectiveness, the tools used must measure what they are intended to measure, for the benefit of the developing child. Talking with families about developmental aspects, sharing their children's work samples, and differentiating between performance and progress are some ways to ensure that families are given an accurate picture of the value and purpose of assessment in support of learning and development (Marcon & Rebecca, 1999).

Assessment according to Airasian (2002:35) "is the process of collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting information to aid classroom decision-making. Helm, Beneke and Steinheimer (1977) endorse it by including information gathered about learners, instruction, and classroom climate. Assessment is, therefore, a great way to map the child's growth over some time, provide feedback to the parents, or assist with classroom management and discipline. However, interestingly, this is contrary to Salvia and Ysseldyke's (1995) opinion that, more often, than not "we choose to engage in assessment because disruptive or dangerous behaviour or because we see "normal behaviour exhibited in inappropriate contexts". Parents can be easily misled about the developmental progress of their children when assessment practices are not sufficiently comprehensive to include well-designed observation and performance/progress-based assessment.

Effective assessment uses a variety of tools, including collections of children's work (drawings, paintings, and writing) and records of conversations and interviews with children (Helm et al 1998). The core of assessment is daily observation. Watching children's ongoing life in the classroom enables teachers to capture children's performance in real activities rather than those contrived to isolate specific skills (Katz, 1984). Research has shown that quality assessment during early childhood is beneficial to children's growth and development throughout life and if competently carried out, it will ensure that children grow up with the necessary skills and capabilities to cope with the expectations of childhood and later adulthood (Samuels, Bophela, & Seleti, 2009:40). However, this is subject to the condition that assessment tools used are appropriate for the benefit of the child's growing and learning. Use of homogeneous assessment tools on ECD children may leave them at risk of being misdiagnosed and assigned to

inappropriate and ineffective interventions or remediation when assessment is limited to group score comparisons (Weinberg, 1987) A clear understanding of functioning assessment is essential for the total development and learning of ECD children. The research today has tended to focus on standardized assessment rather than capturing children's growth and developmental needs in the early years (Katz, 1988). The current study contributes to our knowledge by addressing the important issue in assessment tools that promote learning and development at ECD, their challenges and opportunities.

2. Research Questions

The study is expected to answer the following questions.

How do teachers/caregivers view the use of the developmental checklist as an assessment tool?

Why is the use of the development checklist in teaching and learning young children important?

How can ECD teachers/caregivers mitigate the challenges of using the development checklist?

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is positioned in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory which recognizes an individual's development within the framework of the system of relationships that constitutes his environment (Paquette and Ryan, 2001). Allen (2010:3) references that Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is based on the argument that "...all individuals at the centre and move out from the centre to include all systems that affect the individual". Therefore, an individual does not operate in a vacuum but is shaped by sounding circumstances, events, and timeframes which link with the framework of Bronfenbrenner (1995) which indicates that human development is the product of an interaction among process, person, context, and time. Additionally, the ecological approach to human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) explores the interaction between an individual and the social-physical environment. This approach is based on the belief that "... human development is the process through which the growing person acquires a more extensive, differentiated and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in the form and content" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:29). Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner (1994:40) infers that Bronfenbrenner theory is an attractive one because it is expansive yet focused, one eye is trained on the complex layers of entire, family and community relationships, and the other eye is sharply focused on the individual".

According to Berk (2000), the mesosystem is the layer that provides the connection between the structures of the individual's microsystem, which may include the relation of family experiences to educational experiences, religious experiences, and family experiences to peer experiences. (Paquette & Ryan, 2001:2). In the context of this study, parents are expected to be the source of assessment information, as well as an audience for assessment. Due to the delicateness of direct measures of young children, assessments should include multiple sources of substantiation, especially reports from parents and teachers. Assessment results should be shared with parents as part of an ongoing process that involves parents in their child's education (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Families always want to know how their child is doing in school and will always appreciate specific examples of the child's progress. Showing examples from the child's work over a period enables parents to personally assess the growth and progress of their child.

According to Santrok (2002), the exosystem is involved when experienced in another social setting in which the individual does not have an active role, however, influences what the individual experiences in an immediate context. Therefore, the exosystem defines the larger social system in which the individual does not function directly. The macrosystem is the utmost layer in the individual's environment and involves the culture in which individuals live (Santrok, 2002:42). The macro system in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory involves the culture in which individuals live, which refers to the behaviour patterns, beliefs, and all other products of a group of people that are passed on from generation to generation (Santrock, 2002:43). Young children from different cultures and linguistic background have varied experiences and styles of learning. When planning assessment, interpreting, and reporting results to others these factors need to be carefully considered. Some children will be further along the literacy continuum than others who may need more time, more one-to-one instruction, and more practice (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). At the same time, it is important to ensure that all children gain similar standards of learning and performance.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), a chronosystem encompasses developmental timeframes over the life course of an individual in family structure, socio-economic status, employment, place of residence or the degree of pressured ability in everyday life. The outer system according to Paquette and Ryan (2000) encompasses the dimension of time as it relates to an individual's environment. It involves the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course as well as socio-historical circumstances (Santrock, 2002:42).

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample and its description

The targeted population for this sample was the Early Childhood teachers, ECD Administrators and Early Childhood children aged (3-5) from Maun in Botswana. The estimated total population for the study was thirty (30) participants. Purposive sampling was employed to come up with the sample. The main goal of purposive sampling was to focus on characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best enable the researchers to answer questions (Patton, 2002). Five centres were selected based on their having similar characteristics because such characteristics were of particular interest to the researchers.

4.2 Research design

A qualitative research approach and a case study were adopted for the study. Data were collected using face-to-face interviews, observation, and document analysis. Creswell (2008) defines qualitative research as an investigation procedure of understanding the different systematic habits of inquiry that explore a social situation or human problem. From the qualitative approach, the researchers adopted the case study design that is seen by Babbie (2008); Okeke (2010); and Creswell, (2014) as “a research method that relies upon observation for the acquisition of data”. The decision to embark on the case study was further influenced by the fact that the original data was collected from a population large enough to be described directly.

4.3 Data collection methods

The following method will be used to collect data for this paper.

Interviews

Boyce (2006) stipulates that interviews can be defined as a qualitative research technique which involves conducting interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular programme or situation. Newman (2000) says that an interview is a face-to-face discussion. Thus, an interview is a dialogue where questions are asked, and answers are given in a face-to-face interaction. Pruit and Rugely (2009) describe that, an interview as an interaction between the researcher and the interviewee. Interviews are important in research because they allow the researchers to insight and context into the topic as the interviewer gets firsthand information from the interviewee. It also allows interviewees to express themselves in their mother tongue to emphasize certain points. This enables the

researcher to be able to watch the actions and feelings of the respondents during the conversation. Therefore, the interview in this study was intended to question the ECD administrators on the use of the developmental checklist in teaching and learning at the ECD level in their respective centres.

Observation

According to Thompson (1996), observation is a power of perception. Therefore, an observation gives guidelines as to how an assessment should be conducted. Bandura (1996) mentions that the observation method is the learning that occurs through observing simple happenings focusing on the phenomena and describing what can be seen and recorded. This implies that observation methods are through what one sees and comes up with pictures of a given situation. When using the observation method, the researcher can record exactly what is happening at a particular time. It has been noted that some participants, for example, young children are not able to give verbal responses or reports, therefore, observing is the best. This is supported by Feeney, Christensen and Moravick (2001) who mention that observation is the most appropriate method for studying young children. The observation method allows further analysis or comparisons from time to time. It is through observation that the teacher or caregivers think and employ appropriate strategies to help the learners.

Document analysis

Ribson (2002) mention that document analysis is the systematic exploration of written documents or other artefacts such as films, videos and photographs. Document analysis is a measurement that has been collected giving information that would be difficult to get in any other way. It directs the researcher when conducting the research and is relatively low-cost, particularly when documents are easily accessible. Also, many documents are of good quality and some are detailed. On the other hand, analyzing documents can be time-consuming and it depends on the role of the researcher. In this study completed developmental checklists were randomly selected and analyzed

5. Data Presentation

Regarding their views on the developmental checklist

Teachers responded by saying they use the checklist for monitoring the children's development in the main domains, that is cognitive, physical, social, and emotional.

Some of the responses:

Our role is to note each child's developmental milestones and share what you have seen with parents, and we also use the information for further planning of our activities in the classroom.

Monitoring developmental milestones offers important clues about a child's developmental health.

Completing each form for each child is time-consuming and it is also expensive to produce copies for all learners in the classroom.

The developmental checklist is user-friendly for large classrooms.

Administrators/Head of Centres

Responses from the administrators also confirmed that assessment is being done using different assessment tools. Some administrators indicated that they design developmental checklists for their schools.

Two heads of centres stated that they leave it to the teacher to choose which tool they want to use.

Regarding best opportunities in the use of the checklist

Responses from teachers varied on opportunities, below are some of the responses

The use of these tools can help a teacher feel more confident about what to observe.

Checklists can be shared by the family with other professionals to help communicate their concerns.

Checklists allow for progress to be demonstrated over a period.

Checklists can be completed by educators providing holistic and child-focused experiences that can draw on their knowledge of each child.

Regarding challenges faced in the use of the developmental checklist teachers had this to say

Time-consuming because you must complete a form for each child.

Checklists are not inclusive of children with additional needs who may not be able to succeed at completing tasks as expected at a given time.

They also do not take on board children's home life and cultural differences which may affect different aspects of development.

Checklists are difficult to record children's voices and their interests.

Regarding strategies that could be devised to alleviate these challenges

Teachers were asked to share some of the strategies they thought might be employed to mitigate this situation.

Some teachers stated that the use of other assessment tools would assist in addressing the challenges.

The developmental checklist should be designed in such a way that it embraces all the different traits.

Data obtained through Observation.

To complement the data obtained through interview and document analysis, the researchers made observations on the classroom environment during activities as well as during outdoor free play and the result is presented as follows. During planned activities, children were doing different activities, and the teacher focused on teacher-directed activities, hence the other children were left to play in the indoor play areas, indoor play areas were well demarcated and labelled, however, in some cases learning play equipment was limited compared to the number of children in the area, some teachers had pieces of papers where they scribbled some comments about individual learners, others were recording, this was seen mostly in the outdoor area. In one center the teachers had the development checklist filled in as children were doing their activities.

Data obtained through Document analysis (Completed developmental checklist)

Twenty randomly collected developmental checklists from the five respective centres were analyzed. It was observed that the schools are using the same document in terms of layout and content. Each child in the class had his/her developmental checklist. It was noted that in some cases the teachers were just ticking to show that the learner had achieved that skill. Also noted in some documents ticks were followed by some comments. Of interest was that the ticking was done after a fortnight, in some cases after a month. In two centres it was noted that their developmental checklist only focused on social development.

6. Research findings and discussion

It is fundamental to understand how both formal and informal assessments, when developmentally appropriate design and purpose are used for early childhood learners. The first emerging factor captures how caregivers, parents, siblings, and extended family influenced the development at the ECD level. Follari (2011) chronicles that, a checklist is a document used to monitor each child's development based on developmental milestones peculiar to specific domains. Similarly, Bruce and Meggitt (2010) view the checklist record as meant to specifically check children's progress in different domains including socio-emotional, physical, language, cognitive/intellectual and creativity. A checklist indicates activities across a range of developmentally appropriate tasks, abilities, and competencies in society. As the name implies the tool focuses on checking the child's skills development, the user-friendly, checklist was

found to have gaps in that there was a lack of follow-up since parents rarely undertook the responsibility of monitoring their children's activities. From the caregivers' responses in this study, there was an indication that there were some gaps in the use of the developmental checklist as an assessment tool. Monitoring developmental milestones offers important clues about a child's developmental health and early intervention.

Importance of using the developmental checklist

A well-defined checklist with observation training is critical and essential for an assessment system (Fargundes et al., 1998). The use of a developmental checklist is a quick way of presenting a great deal of information. This document is user-friendly in our Botswana ECD centres where we find very high numbers of enrollment of learners. The same guide can be used for several children to find out more about the group. This can indicate gender differences or show that there are none. Observation of child behaviours and skills provides the teacher with a powerful measure of the child's abilities. For example, a teacher's observation of a child retelling what happened at home with a big smile and expressive language is a true measure of oral language skills than asking the child to retell a story in an unfamiliar setting. This allows the teacher to get valuable and individualized information about the child's developing skills and knowledge. The other opportunity is that they provide information that helps administrators strengthen existing programmes and hold them accountable.

Challenges in the use of the developmental checklist

The assessment of young children is very different from the assessment of older children and adults in many ways. The greatest difference is in the way young children learn. They construct knowledge in experiential, interactive, concrete, and hands-on rather than through abstract reasoning and paper-pencil activities alone (Emberton & Hershberger, 1999). Also, assessment using a checklist can be challenging because care must be taken to maintain objectivity. It is very tempting to put a tick against skills which you previously thought the child had achieved. More often a checklist may not give a true picture if the child is less than cooperating on the day, or if the child is unwell, hence there is a need for an ongoing assessment using a variety of documentation methods and multiple adults (Hauser-Cram et al., 2001). This is essential in capturing the most comprehensive of a child's development over time in various contexts. At times checklist may not show how competent the child is at the task, only that it has been completed. Also noted is that the child should not be unaware of being assessed or may become stressed. One may have to show resourcefulness to turn the assessment into a game, otherwise,

the data will be invalid and unreliable. Assessment should be individually administered to elicit the most accurate and useful information for the teacher/caregiver (Carman, 2007).

7. Conclusion

Based on the results gathered in this study, it can be concluded that a developmental checklist is ideal for tracking children's development and learning, however, it should be used in conjunction with other assessment tools to cater for individual differences, age-appropriate, cognitive development level as well as cultural differences. In the process of assessing young children, all stakeholders should be incorporated if we are to realize total development in young children. It cannot then be overemphasized that we need to 'catch them young.' The appropriate use of information from early childhood assessments is to guide instruction and to determine what the child is ready for next in terms of knowledge and skills.

8. Recommendations

Given the findings of this study, the researchers would like to recommend that;

- The developmental checklist should be used in conjunction with other assessment tools.
- Teachers/caregivers are encouraged to make follow-ups on their observation assessment.
- Ticks in the developmental checklist are to be accompanied by comments.
- Appropriate use of the developmental checklist in a well-prepared environment can cater for individual differences and promote learning.
- Early Childhood centres should regularly assess children to monitor their growth and development.

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