

Challenges of Assessment of Learners with Disabilities in Pre and Primary Schools: Experience from Rukwa Region in Tanzania

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Abstract

This paper investigated the challenges of assessing learners with disabilities in Tanzanian primary schools. It explored the views of teachers and learners with disabilities regarding the challenges of assessments for learners with disabilities, and what needs to be done to address the situation. This paper reports findings from a qualitative study that employed a case study design in four primary schools in Tanzania. A total of 34 participants were engaged in the study using a purposive sampling strategy: 04 Heads of schools, 10 special needs specialist teachers, 20 pupils with different disabilities, where 09 had hearing impairment, 07 were visually impaired, and 04 had physical disabilities. Data were generated through interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews. The findings indicated that the assessment of learners with disabilities in Tanzania is still unsatisfactory due to insufficient resources, insufficient supportive infrastructure, poor assessment environment and insufficient experts in the area to support learners with disabilities. Furthermore, the study findings indicated the challenges in curriculum implementation. It is also revealed that pupils with disabilities have their own way of learning, different from pupils without disabilities. According to their nature, teachers use much time to teach them and not easy to finish the syllabus on time, pupils in some cases find some questions whose topics were not covered. This study recommends that there is a need for a forging of partnership between the government and the practitioners. Government policymakers should set clear policies regarding learners with disabilities in diverse aspects such as human, fiscal and time resources. There is also a need for legal frameworks to be in place to protect learners with disabilities from neglect, social stigma and prejudice. Learners with disabilities are to be effectively dealt with, so learners should be empowered to reach their potentials in life.

Keywords: Assessment, learners with disabilities, primary-schools in Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Education in Tanzania and across the world is a right for all citizens (URT, 2014; URT 2010). In an effort to achieve this goal, the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania sets

out its vision, overarching policy and strategic objectives for the education sector and captures it in the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) since 1997 (URT, 2010; URT, 2020). The ESDP serves as a holistic framework for the delivery of education and allows to enhance coordination, collaboration and synchronization of education (URT, 2014; URT, 2004). To respond to the needs of the most vulnerable children, the Government developed the National Strategy for Inclusive Education 2021-2025. The Strategy aimed to ensure that all children, youth and adults in Tanzania have equitable access to quality education in inclusive settings (URT, 2020; URT, 2010). Tanzania has made major advances in improving access to basic education, achieving significant progress in enrolment, school infrastructure and the provision of teaching and learning materials. However, the access to education for most vulnerable learners, including pupils with disabilities needs to be improved. Teaching, learning, and assessment for children with disabilities is still challenging. In this paper, the researcher outlines major issues raised by teachers and pupils with disabilities regarding to challenges they face during their assessment. This paper describes an agenda for future research directions and discuss implications for policy and practice.

Assessment of Learners with Disabilities

Assessment is concerned with collecting evidence about learning that is used to adapt teaching and plan next steps in learning (Bahir, 2015; Fanuel et al., 2015; William, 2017). Evidence about learning is crucial as it indicates whether there have been changes in a pupil's learning progress and possibly learning processes. On the basis of such evidence, teachers can formulate targets and are able to provide pupils with feedback about their learning (Bahir, 2015). Feedback is clearly indicating to a pupil not just what they have learned, but also giving pupils information on how they may have learned it and how best they can learn in the future. The feedback provided during assessment contributes to a pupils' reflection on their own learning. A number of literatures reviewed indicate that assessment is often described as involving forms of self-reflection (Bahir, 2015; Westbrook & Croft, 2015; William, 2017), or more specifically, as a means by which pupils reflect on their own learning as they are engaged in an interaction with their teachers. The essential aim of assessment is to promote pupils' meta-cognition; that is their own understanding of not just what they learn, but how they learn and can learn in the best way (Fanuel et al., 2015; Westbrook & Croft, 2015; Johnstone & Chapman, 2011). Assessment involves issues of self-reflection and self-assessment that develops a pupils' own understanding of how learning is taking place and how it can be developed (William, 2017). In essence, the critical question to ask is what are the challenges facing pupils with special educational needs in assessment of their learning needs?

One potential area of concern highlighted by researchers in relation to assessment of pupils with disabilities is about their multiple disabilities. Engaging pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties in assessment is seen as challenging if not well organized (Johnstone & Chapman, 2011; William, 2017). However, researcher's reflections on this potential setback 4 denoted that pupils with profound difficulties do not need different assessment systems, but only different methods/tools of assessment (Bahr, 2015; Fanuel et al., 2015; William, 2017). Questions need to be framed in a way that allows pupils with disabilities to have enough time to answer and if different stimuli to support questions (e.g. visual versus verbal stimuli) and ways of responding (e.g. eye contact) need to be considered. Learners with disabilities require teaching and learning approaches that differ from the traditional approaches hence creating the need for teachers to relook at the methods of assessment used

(Fanuel et al., 2015; Johnstone and Chapman, 2011). Teacher training programs have not generally empowered teachers in dealing with pupils with special learning needs (Bahr, 2015; Fanuel et al., 2015). This paper seeks to critically discuss the problems of assessing pupils with disabilities such as visual challenges, hearing challenges and physical disabilities pupils. Therefore, assessment of learners with special needs should of necessity take these variations into consideration.

Increasing attention is being paid to the need for systems of assessments for learners with disabilities, with an emphasis on the design and use of assessments intended to function much closer to the processes of assessment (Johnstone & Chapman, 2011; William, 2017). Thus, there is need for careful consideration of the design and validation of assessments intended for learners with disability. Effective evaluations should assess learners with disability according to their needs and requirement, including vision, hearing, general intelligence, communication abilities, social and emotional status, academic performance, and motor skills. Challenges faced by teachers in classroom situations in identifying and assess pupils with special learning needs include among other needs, hearing impairment and deafness, visual impairment and blindness, dyslexia, mental retardation, and gifted learners was a great concern (Bahir 2015; Zigler, et al., 2017).

The main research question was to explore challenges in the assessment of learners with disabilities in Tanzanian primary schools, focusing on visual, hearing and physical disabilities challenges. The aim was to explore views and opinions of teachers on how they overcome the situation.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study as, an interpretive and qualitative study, employed a case study design (Yin, 2014), to explore the assessment of learners with disabilities in primary schools in Tanzania. Qualitative approach was used because of its potential to generate rich data (Sarantakos, 2013) on how the participants viewed the assessment of learners with disabilities. The study elicited views based on three groups of participants: Heads of schools, classroom teachers specialized on special educational needs, and pupils with disabilities. A total of 34 people (04 Heads of schools, 10 special needs teachers, 20 pupils whereby 09 with hearing impairment; 07 visual impairments and 04 pupils with physical disabilities) were purposively selected and involved in the study. The sampled teachers were selected by the head teacher of the particular school. Only teachers who are specialists in special needs and willing to participate in the study were involved. They were involved because they have more experience concerning the challenges on assessment of learners with disabilities. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document reviews.

Data Collection

Heads of schools were interviewed twice, the second time as a follow up to fill gaps noticed after the analysis of the first interview. Each interview lasted for 40-55 minutes for each head of school. On the other hand, classroom teachers were interviewed once; the interviews varied in duration from 45 to 60 minutes. Learners with hearing impairment were interviewed for 1.30 hrs because of their nature; a specialist in sign language interviewed them. For those with visual impairment, the interviews lasted between 55 to 60 minutes. Interviews for those with physical impairments lasted between 45 to 55 minutes. During the follow-up interviews

and FGDs, data that were found repeated from previous interviews were not recorded because they did not provide new information. FGDs were conducted with classroom teachers, about 06 teachers formed the group and each session of FGD took 45-55 minutes. All the study participants gave their consent for the interviews to be recorded with a audio recorder except learners with hearing impairment. To conceal the identity of the study participants, no names were recorded on the audio-tapes.

Data Analysis

The data of this study were qualitative in nature and were analysed thematically. After completing the data generation, the exercise of transcription started. The audio recorder that contained interview data was carefully listened to and transcriptions were made. Therefore, coding of the transcripts from the interviews with heads and pupils emerged from the basic questions and FGDs were conducted with classroom teachers. The analysis of the data began with open coding; researchers coded the materials using coding framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2014). A process by which concepts are identified and established through asking questions about the data, and labelling and grouping similar occurrences and events into categories. With the help of the NVivo10 software, the researcher coded all the data, addressing the research questions for each separate participant. The data were grouped into themes and analysed for each participant separately.

Ethical Statement

Permission to conduct the study was secured from the regional administrative secretary (RAS) in Rukwa region in Tanzania. The researcher also secured permission from the University's Research and Publications Committee to be allowed to conduct the study. Among other things this university organ is responsible for monitoring and evaluating agreement to ethical conducts in undertaking research, and it can recommend to the senate actions to be taken upon the breach of research ethics. The participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the study if they were not comfortable. Consent was obtained from parents of minors participating in the study to participate in the study. Also, participants were assured of anonymity in the research report.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in this section are mainly based on analysis from the interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary reviews with the Heads of schools, classroom teachers, and pupils with disabilities since their points of view are the main focus of this study. Policy documents were used to supplement and verify the interview data from the head teachers and classroom teachers. The documents were analysed to elaborate the degree to which the policy documents such as a National Policy on Disability 2004, the Person with Disability Act 2010 and Education and Training Policy of 2014 and its revisions on 2023 were reflected in assessment of children with disabilities.

Also, a documentary review was carried out to understand what was suggested in the policy documents regarding the assessment of students with disability. To achieve comparable information, the interview themes were overlapping and similar for all study participants (i.e head teachers, classroom teachers, and pupils). In addition, representative quotes were

included, to clarify the points under discussion. The main research question was to explore challenges in the assessment of learners with disabilities in Tanzanian primary schools.

The findings indicated that every learner is unique and should be assessed differently, with special consideration to their circumstances. Challenges faced by teachers in classroom situations in identifying and assessment of learners with special educational needs include among many other needs, visual impairment and blindness, hearing impairment and deafness, and physical impaired learners. The following quotes point out the concerns which were raised during focus group discussion:

Assessment of learners with disabilities needs a special attention. Pupils with disabilities have a tendency of losing memory; they forget what they were taught easily due to their nature. Learners with disabilities, especially those who are hard of hearing, have problems of forgetting and this leads to some subjects seeming difficult for them hence problematic in assessment [Classroom Teacher/FGD/ August 2024].

Another classroom teacher added:

In inclusive classroom, some teachers who are not expert in working with special needs pupils lack knowledge as results create tension to pupils with disabilities. For instance, no extension of time especially during the examination period as required for learners with special needs. I suggest all teachers to be familiar on the needs and requirement of pupils with special learning needs and consideration is essential [Classroom Teacher/ FGD/ August 2024].

A pupil with disability reported:

Non-separation of examination rooms of pupils with disability and pupils who do not have challenges. Pupils with disabilities need separate examination rooms, they need cool place free from noises. Also, lack of tools that could help our learning to be easy or that will make it easier for our memories to exist during the examinations [Pupil/Interview/ August 2024].

The findings indicated that teachers who teach learners with disabilities have to spend long time teaching repeatedly and thus leads to a delay in finishing the topics on time. As a result, learners face difficulties in examinations because teachers are not keeping up with existing curricula. It is important that learners with disabilities derive maximum benefit from assessment to ensure maximum participation in school, and eventually society. However, teachers in schools are not all trained professionals in the identification and assessment of learners with disabilities. The findings indicated that most pupils with special needs are progressing through schools without proper assessment.

Pupils who miss assessment are unable to access specific educational programmes, including modified classroom instruction, curriculum, tests, and examinations. Pupils with disabilities can access these benefits only if they have been diagnostically assessed. Given the limited number of pupils who are assessed, many pupils with special needs in Tanzania struggle to succeed with specialized programmes in schools. The lack of school level intervention teams

with sufficient skills to assess the pupils' different special learning needs at the onset means that some learners are left unassisted.

Given the apparent increase in the number of learners with disabilities at primary school level due to free primary education policy, primary school teachers are now more likely to encounter many pupils with disabilities in their classrooms. The need for assessment of learners with special needs challenges teachers to provide better classroom support, and yet teachers face a huge challenge in getting such assessment information for a substantial number of their pupils. Another critical challenge observed was about the infrastructure for pupils with disabilities. The findings indicated that many school buildings did not consider pupils with disabilities. A classroom teacher noted:

Fair assessment for pupils with special learning needs have to consider a number of factors such as teaching and learning environment. Are they supportive for learners with disabilities? Those with hearing impairment; do they have supportive devices? Visual impaired; do they have devices to support them? Physically impaired; do they have friendly environment when moving here and there? So, assessment for pupils with various disabilities need to be considered in keeping together all factors which might hinder their smooth assessment [Classroom Teacher/ FGD/ August 2024].

The above quote emphasizes on taking into consideration other factors if we need to have fair assessment for pupils with disabilities. A number of pupils might fail to attend assessment due to a lack of supportive environment in terms of movement for physical impaired pupils and those with visual impairment and those with communication challenges. Moreover, findings indicated the changes of signs which used in the sign language; sometimes pupils become unaware of new changes. Among others, one pupil commented:

We, pupils, with hearing impairment use sign language. Sometimes, during examinations we note signs which we are not aware of; consequently, we fail the examinations. So, I suggest that whenever changes occur in the sign language, we should be informed and practice before the assessment [Pupil/ Interview/ August 2024].

Another pupil added:

Sometimes I feel frustrated when taking tests or examination and find that some words have no sign. This makes the question unclear to me. I suggest the examinations to be reviewed by special needs professionals before its commencement [Pupil/Interview/August 2024].

The findings suggest that pupils with disabilities need professionals in all special learning needs who can take care of their situation accordingly. However, trained personnel in the area of special needs are not enough. In schools, pupils with disabilities are still minors and the need for guardians to authorize their assessment is problematic because these are not always forthcoming. It needs clear regulations and procedures to be followed during preparations of their tests and examinations. Assessment needs to be fair to all pupils with available support

from professionals who can understand their situation as well as the supporting devices. Teachers and school administrators should be able to identify pupils' challenges and if critical should refer to specialist centers and practitioners to get help at an early stage.

Discussion

The study examined challenges of assessment of learners with disabilities in Tanzanian primary schools, taking Rukwa region as a case study. The findings revealed that assessment needs more improvement for pupils with disabilities (Westbrook and Croft, 2015). Lack of trained personnel in the area to support learners with disabilities and supporting devices, insufficient resources, insufficient supportive infrastructure, and poor assessment environment were noted as obstacles towards fair assessment (Bahr, et al., 2015; Fanuel et al., 2015; William, 2017). These findings are in line with a study conducted by Fanuel et al., (2015), who reported that assessment of learners with special learning needs have a number of problems such as specialized skills, competences and resources required and expertise of personnel to deal with them. Westbrook and Croft (2015) stressed that every learner is unique and should be assessed differently, with special consideration to their circumstances. Teachers also face challenges to identify and assess learners with special learning needs such as hearing impaired, deaf, visual impaired, intellectually impaired, and gifted learners, to mention but a few (Bahr, et al., 2015; Fanuel et al., 2015; William, 2017).

Furthermore, the study findings indicated challenges in curriculum implementation. Pupils with disabilities have their own way of learning, different from pupils without disabilities (Johnstone and Chapman, 2011; URT, 2014). Experience indicates that pupils with disabilities learn slowly, with much of repetition which might lead to failure of finishing of required topics and assessment. It is viewed that assessment needs to accommodate needs and requirement of learners with disabilities. It is acknowledged that assessment has a direct influence on teaching and learning (Bahr, et al., 2015; Fanuel et al., 2015; William, 2017), and that its power can be connected and directed towards positive outcomes. It is important that pupils with disabilities derive maximum benefit from assessment to ensure maximum participation in school, and eventually society (URT, 2020; William, 2017). However, teachers in schools are not all trained professionals in the identification and assessment of learners with disabilities (Fanuel, et al., 2015; Johnstone and Chapman, 2011). The findings revealed that most pupils with disabilities are progressing through schools without proper assessment. It is an accepted fact that assessment is one of the cornerstones of the successful learner (Fanuel, et al., 2015; Johnstone and Chapman, 2011; URT, 2014). If not well handled, this in turn leads to drop out of school for pupils with disabilities due to frustration, failure and lack of clear career paths. The study participants' views and beliefs could be explained by the fact that challenges facing learners with disabilities in assessment are yet to be understood by the majority of community members and policy makers (Bahr, et al., 2015; William, 2017). It is for this reason that pupils with disabilities in Tanzania are felt neglected, socially stigmatized, prejudice, and marginalized that they are not fit to be part of the society.

CONCLUSION

The challenges of assessment of learners with disabilities are to be effectively dealt with and the learners should be empowered to reach their individual maximum potentials in life. The assessment of learners with special learning needs has deeply rooted issues, stemming from unclear policies, development of sustainable teacher training and teacher support

mechanisms in dealing with the many forms of learning needs that the pupils have (Fanuel, et al., 2015; Johnstone and Chapman, 2011; URT, 2014). The findings of this study suggest that there is also a need for legal frameworks to be in place to protect the learners with disabilities from neglect, social stigma, and prejudice. The lack of school level intervention teams with sufficient skills to assess the different special learning needs of learners at the onset means that some learners are left unassisted (Westbrook and Croft, 2015; William, 2015). Pupils with disabilities need to be assessed and placed in the friendly learning environments which have specialists as most appropriate for their learning needs. Tanzania lacks clear policy guidelines on the assessment of learners with disabilities. This contrast with the situations in most developed countries, where laws and guidelines around assessment articulate what should happen for pupils at different stages of schooling.

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