

An Investigation into the Robustness of the Assessment of Learners with Special Needs: Case of Leseli Community School

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ABSTRACT

Education for learners with special needs remains a challenge for developing countries like Lesotho where development of infrastructure and appropriate training for personnel is still at its infancy. With the number of learners with special needs on the rise, lack of basic necessities has compelled such learners to be absorbed in the main stream education system, leaving educators frustrated. Although having all inclusive education as professed by the government may be an ideal situation for learners with special needs, what remains a barrier is the mode of assessment for such learners. The study sought to establish the depth and breadth of the assessment of learners with special needs in Lesotho. The study was conducted using the qualitative methodology. The in-depth interviews were conducted in order to get a thorough and informed insight that reveals how learners with special needs are evaluated. Documents such as Education Act 2010, The National Constitution and Children's Protection and Welfare Act 2011 were analysed to assess whether they respond to the needs of such learners. The informant selection techniques employed were convenience and purposive sampling. respondents were selected based on their availability and willingness to respond. The findings were analysed using thematic method of analysis. The study revealed that the government has not done enough to ensure inclusive education. This is evidenced by lack of clear policies for learners with special needs, as well as facilities and trained personnel for such learners.

KEYWORDS: *assessment, inclusive education, learners, special needs, special education*

INTRODUCTION

Delivery of education appropriate for pupils with special needs is a challenge in Lesotho mainly due to lack of proper infrastructure, teaching and learning materials and most importantly, qualified personnel to cater for the special needs of these disadvantaged pupils. Kiyuba and Tukur (2014), looking at the situation of children with special needs in Uganda, write that with the universal declaration of human rights coming into force in 1948, the realization of universal special education became the main agenda of many world conferences. This means that catering for the needs of children with special needs in education is a human right.

Emphasizing the fact that catering for children with special needs in education is a human right, Udoba (2014) says that the United Nations Organization is pushing the agenda for education for all and therefore children with development disabilities will need extra attention in terms of curriculum adaptation, teaching methods, availability of teaching and learning materials, assistive technology, assessment systems, as well as resources and funds for adapting school environments.

Advocating for education policies that promote inclusion in contemporary systems of education, Bouillet and Kudek-Mirosevic (2015) write that inclusive education allows children with and without disabilities to attend the same

age-appropriate classes, with additional, individually tailored support where needed. Describing a situation that fits the one of Lesotho, Bouillet and Kudek- Mirosevic (2015) go on to say that children with disabilities are still faced with a lot of challenges in realizing their right to education and they are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups in education.

Identifying the importance of the need to train personnel providing education to children with special needs, Mpofo and Shumba (2012) write that in order to improve the quality of primary and secondary education of children with special needs, policy makers are challenged to look closely at the preparation of those who work with young children before the eligibility age of primary education. In other words, the education system should start catering for disadvantaged children starting with qualified personnel who will teach and assess the educational development of these children with special needs skillfully and professionally. However, this study's main focus is on assessment systems for children with special needs in Leseli Community School. This school has a Pre and Primary school for mentally and physically challenged children. It also has able bodied children. The school inculcates among learners the culture of accepting one another despite the differences.

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Statement of problem

Assessment for children with special needs in Lesotho is problematic in the sense that no general provisions are made by the education system except for visually impaired learners.

Study objectives

This study sought to investigate the measures put in place by the education system in Lesotho to cater for learners with special needs at primary school level and to establish how best such learners can be assessed without disadvantaging them because of their disabilities.

Research questions

- How many public special schools to cater for children with special needs have been established so far in Lesotho?
- How effective is the education system in Lesotho to cater for children with special needs in those public special schools?
- What measures have been put in place in Lesotho to cater for learners with special needs in other schools apart from the public special schools?
- What system has the ministry of education and training in Lesotho put in place for effective assessment of learners with special needs under the Examinations Council of Lesotho (ECOL) supervision?

Theoretical framework

The theory that best informs this study on assessment of learners with special needs is constructivism. Sajadi and Khan (2011) write that constructivism is an educational theory developed by Jean Piaget (1954) which explains how people learn in practice. Sajadi and Khan (2011) also cite Kirscher (2006) saying that constructivism learning theory focuses on the construction of new knowledge by the learner from active learner-driven experiences. The point of emphasis on learner centeredness of constructivism makes it the most relevant theory to inform this study because assessing learners with special needs should use the latter's needs as point of departure.

Literature review

The Ministry of Education and Training (2009) writes that Curriculum and Assessment Policy 2008 emphasizes the learner centered approach, encouraging teaching and learning methods that can further develop creativity, independence, and survival skills of learners. The policy further elaborates that learners are expected to become more responsible for their own learning processes and thus should be able to identify, formulate and solve problems by themselves and evaluate their work. The Lesotho government took a step further in Education Sector Strategic Plan 2005-2015 (2005) which states that in Integrated Early Childhood Care and Development, special attention was made to undertake a study to establish the magnitude of the challenge of addressing children with disabilities and to design the best strategies to integrate them into the IECCD programmes.

Although the policies encourage inclusion and independence of learners, this may not apply to all learners across learning spheres. Sperotto (2014) argues that educational assessment of a student with special needs can be challenging and, if not administered correctly, can provide a misrepresentation of

the child's actual academic abilities. Raselimo and Mahao (2015) write that Lesotho Curriculum and Assessment Policy 2008 state that for optimum learning, learners should take a minimum of six subjects. However, Hussua and Strleb (2010) state that the assessment of children with special needs is already a dilemma from the teachers', pupils' or parents' perspectives, and heavy workload for the disadvantaged would only be a burden, resulting in high dropout rates. Harris and James (2006) noted that assessment will be most effective if students understand its purpose, what they are required to do, and the standards that are expected.

Mkandawire, Mapahale and Tseeke (2016) write that for decades, Lesotho and Malawi have neglected special education, leaving it in the hands of non-governmental organisations, charitable organizations, individuals and churches. This meant that assessment was also left out in curriculum development.

Hussua and Strleb (2010) assert that although traditional education and assessment relied heavily on teachers' assessment of pupils' knowledge over a specified period as prescribed by the curriculum, the current trends in education and assessment are to encourage pupils in learning to improve their personal skills. Anderson, 1998, in ElSaheli-Elhage and Sawilowsky (2016) considers traditional assessment as a passive process where students memorized knowledge from materials or the teacher. Hence, the frequent use of the empty vessel metaphor to describe learners. However, Watson (2017) states that assessments are important; as they provide the child with an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, skill, and understanding. Sperotto (2014) adds that a typical standardized assessment in schools would not be relevant for students with special needs. However, Shriner, 2000, in ElSaheli-Elhage and Sawilowsky (2016) states that learning becomes meaningless without defined assessment, in a case where special education focuses on an individual student and her/his educational needs.

Gregg, 2009, in Sperotto (2014) urges educators to adopt assessment accommodation, which includes among others, modification of timing, setting, presentation, response, and scheduling of assessment. Woolfolk, 2002, in Hussua and Strleb (2010) writes that the assessment that is directed toward diagnosis is often understood as formative assessment. It can occur before or during the learning process and has two important goals: directing the teacher in planning the teaching process and helping the pupil in identifying the main study areas that have to be improved

Hussua and Strleb (2010) state that teachers use several approaches to motivate pupils, including planning the learning process with students. Some teachers like to organize their work in a different way, such as, through group work, projects, and experiments. Genishi, 2000, in Villamero (2014) asserts that "nothing is scientific about this kind of assessment – it is based on developing a relationship with students, knowing who they are and being interested in who they are to become".

Villamero (2014) writes that Vygotsky introduced the concept of dynamic assessment, which is an approach to understanding individual differences and their implications for instruction that embeds intervention within the assessment procedure.

Despite attempts to ensure inclusive learning, ElSaheli-Elhage and Sawilowsky (2016) note that inadequate literature on the assessment of learners with special needs is a deterrent in the assessment of children with disabilities. Gaad, 2010, in ElSaheli-Elhage and Sawilowsky (2016) adds that details on provisions for students with learning disabilities who are already in mainstream schools are difficult to gather. Information about the exact range of services and teachers' assessment practices and expertise available is heavily dependent upon word of mouth, not a central information provider. The other challenge highlighted by ElSaheli-Elhage and Sawilowsky (2016) is lack of evidence on the assessment of children with special needs. Koretz and Barton (2003) write that until very recently, many students with disabilities were routinely excluded from large-scale assessments.

Mkandawire, Mapahale and Tseeke (2016) state that the Ministry of Education in Lesotho made commendable strides through the publication of the education policy in 1989, to address specific requirements of special education. It was subsequently followed by the establishment of the special education unit whose main purpose was to oversee the integration of children with special education needs into mainstream schools by the Ministry of Education in 1991.

Methodology

The study used qualitative methodology to gather, present and analyse data. In-depth interviews were conducted together with document analysis. Boyce (2006) writes that in-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on an idea, program or situation.

Rivas and Gibson-Light (2016) suggest that in qualitative research and specifically for researchers carrying out in-depth interviews, the constructed representations about the world that subjects are able to express are the main source of scholarly knowledge. Rivas and Gibson-Light (2016) cite Denzin (2001:23) saying that we know the world only through our representations of it and that these representations can only be known through an "emic" perspective. This means interpreting thoroughly subjects' meanings of their own actions and of others' actions, and that this emic perspective is carried out within specific interpretative contexts (Rivas and Gibson-Light, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, in-depth interviews were administered to authorities responsible for assessment of learners with special needs, at Leseli Community School and officials at the Examinations Council of Lesotho.

Documents were also analysed in addition to in-depth interviews. Mogalakwe (2006) writes that a document is an artifact which has as its central feature an inscribed text. For this study, documentation used for analysis and evaluation was the Lesotho national policy documents for pedagogy and assessment of children with special needs.

Findings

Although Lesotho is a signatory to international treaties and conventions for inclusive education, the informant from Leseli Community School stated that government has not made commendable strides towards ensuring inclusive

education for learners with all forms of disabilities. This is evidenced by poor infrastructure and lack of resources to cater for learners with different forms of disabilities.

The informant added that having realized that learners have different disabilities; each student is assessed individually depending on progress levels. Leseli Community School uses Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale which is used to assess the adaptive behavior skills for children and adolescents of up to 18 years. This assessment method delves into three subscales of assessment, namely, communication (receptive, expressive, written), socialization (interpersonal relationships, play and leisure, coping skills), and daily living (person, domestic, community).

The informant noted that assessment of learners depends on the student's level of disability, and how an educator adapts assessment to meet the requirements of each learner. It also goes beyond assessment, and includes the rapport an educator develops with the said learner in order to make progress in the learning process.

In teaching and assessment of learners with special needs, the informant raised an alarm on the issue of educators who lack training and adequate skills to address the needs of learners with special needs. In cases of severe autism, a learner needs more time and qualified personnel to work with such a student. The informant said that inadequate human resources and relevant teaching aids remain serious challenges for educators in catering for students with special needs.

The informant further stated that for some students, the assessment and learning process is informal, due to the fact that these kinds of learners fail to adapt to the formal setting process. The basis for assessment and evaluation is formative assessment because with the summative assessment learners require a certain level of stability. The informant said learners with special needs have been alienated from the formal education system, stating that this has rendered them incompetent and not capable of grasping information.

The informant stated that educators need to be extra cautious and patient with such learners, as they take a longer time to grasp and digest information. What remains another major challenge with these learners, according to the informant, is that educators feel compelled to complete the syllabus prescribed by the Ministry of Education, and they therefore neglect learners with special needs, leading to high dropout rates because such learners feel worthless.

The informant also said poverty has made assessment of learners a challenge for educators because a number of schools, especially in remote areas cannot afford teaching aids for learners either with hearing or visual impairment. The informant added that despite Lesotho having signed and ratified international treaties and conventions to cater for learners with special needs, such learners are still not catered for in mainstream education, thereby rendering policies ineffective.

The Constitution of Lesotho, Chapter 3, guarantees the right to education for all. Lesotho took a bold step further in the Education Act 2010, where primary education was legally

made free and compulsory for all. The Education Act further seeks to, align the education laws with decentralisation of services and make provision for education for all in accordance with the provisions of section 28 of the Constitution. Section 4(2) (b) of the Education Act compels all stakeholders in education to absorb children into the education system despite their disabilities:

The Minister, Principal Secretary, Teaching Service Commission, proprietors of schools, teachers and school boards shall promote the education of the people of Lesotho and in particular - ensure, as soon as circumstances permit, that a learner who is physically, mentally or otherwise handicapped is given the special treatment, education and care required by his or her condition;

The Examinations Council of Lesotho informant stated that all students enrolled into mainstream education are examined to progress to the next level. However, assessment for learners with visual, hearing, physical and intellectual disability varies depending on the needs of each learner.

The informant stated that ECoL receives a report from schools if learners have special needs during examinations. For the learners with visual impairment, the examination will be in braille, while for those with low vision exam papers are in large fonts. But the font size depends on how poor a learner's vision is. The informant further stated that although the examination was standard, it was a challenge for the visually impaired as graphics was a problem. The informant added that, this challenge has been dealt with, as equipment to aid visual impairment learners and educators with graphics are now available. Visually impaired learners are given 100% extra time during exams to allow them to grasp questions and write their answers.

The informant said for learners with hearing impairment, a standard exam is provided, but ECoL avails an interpreter in case such learners may require assistance.

Physical disability can be a serious challenge for ECoL as some learners do not have hands to write the examinations. ECoL has to secure scribes to assist such learners during exams. The tricky part to this issue is that scribes have to go through intense training because they have to uphold a certain level of ethics and professionalism. They have to only write what a learner is saying. The learner in this case is afforded 25% extra time during an exam.

As for learners with intellectual disability, the informant noted that standardized exams in the past composed of compositions, comprehension and multiple choice, had been cancelled by ECoL, leaving only multiple choice questions in Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE). Learners with intellectual disability never made it through the PSLE as they failed to meet set minimum requirement by ECoL. With the abolition of PSLE, intellectual disability learners will be ushered into secondary schools and that is where the Council will begin to encounter a sizeable number of learners with intellectual disabilities in both secondary and high school. The informant added that educators are therefore encouraged to submit reports highlighting learner's capabilities in order to be trained based on their unique traits and capacities.

Discussion of findings and recommendations

The government of Lesotho should be aggressive in fighting for equality in education from pre- school level, by putting in place a comprehensive policy to guide the implementation of this vision to tertiary institutions. This should direct the placement of appropriate and necessary infrastructure to cater for children with disability.

The Ministry of Education and Training should develop curriculum to cater for children with special needs by using the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale currently used by Leseli Community School as a point of departure. This, if properly studied and implemented, can be adopted by more schools all over the country so as to make nationwide education for children with special needs.

Special training and facilities for special education teachers should also be put in place at the level of the ministry. This should be prioritized because children with special needs are already attending school. It is ideal for special education teachers to be equipped with all the requisite skills to educate and assess disadvantaged children from kindergarten up to tertiary level.

With only few schools specifically enrolling children with special needs, ECoL should take an active role in distributing assessment guidelines for children with special needs. The ECoL has to collaborate with the authorities responsible for curriculum development so that the educators at school level are thoroughly informed and adequately guided on assessing learners with special needs. Assessment for children with special needs should be formalized and professionalized like assessment for children in normal formal education sector under the ECoL.

It would be very ideal for the Ministry of Education and Training in Lesotho to engage international organizations such as UNICEF to solicit for assistance in establishing infrastructure that is user friendly for children with special needs. The point of departure by the ministry should however, be the training of teachers in order to empower them with all the skills and knowledge required to effectively train pupils with special needs.

The second step would be to increase the number of schools for learners with special needs both at primary and secondary school levels. These schools will have to be spread to all the districts of Lesotho rather remain centered only in specific areas like Leseli Community School in Maseru.

After the training of personnel and establishment of the requisite infrastructure, this study strongly recommends that pedagogy and assessment policies for pupils with special needs be put in place and their implementation be monitored by the relevant authorities. The model already put in place for assessing learners with special needs at Leseli Community School can be explored and spread all over the country in schools that cater for learners with special needs.

Conclusion

Assessment of learners with special needs remain a challenge for the mountain kingdom, and a lot has to be done if the Education policy which calls for inclusive education becomes effective.

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