

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: SELF-EVALUATION FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Children's achievement and performance through marks or grades are often considered as a tool to determine a child's ability. What goes beyond the marks and grades were often ignored. Are marks and grades not affected by social-emotional factors? Through field experiences and search in literature, the author has come to believe that the fundamentals of learning in young children stem from strong social-emotional domain. The relationships between cognitive and social-emotional-behavioural development are closely related and cannot be ignored. It is believed that the relationship appear to be even more significant in the population of children who have Learning Disabilities (LD) inherent or otherwise. Children with LD have been predisposed to the many learning problems in schools in their early years. Feeling like failures, these children may even face constant negatively labelling in schools by adults and peers; they have greater need to develop strong social-emotional-behavioural domains than other children. It is worthwhile to spend some efforts to have a closer look at the issues involving social-emotional and behavioural development. The author hoped to device an alternative approach by using portfolio to assessing young children with social-emotional-behavioural problems through which mediation or enhancement of social-emotional and behavioural domains of children can be used by teachers, parents and caregivers.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a powerful educational tool for promoting effective learning. In the case of children with learning disabilities (LD), they are increasingly exposed to a variety of assessments, whether of their abilities, functioning, learning, attitudes, behaviour or adjustment. Assessment can yield a basis for planning the next steps in response to their needs, if it is done in the right ways. It provides feedback to be incorporated into teaching strategies and practices in all levels. Teachers should use assessment as part of teaching and learning to raise pupils' achievement. The traditional role of assessment for the purposes of grading and reporting should be reconceptualized to promote learning. In this regards, an effective way to assessing young children through developmentally appropriate assessment is by means of authentic assessment to review their portfolios.

WHAT IS PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT?

The portfolio is a record of the child's process of learning: what the child has learned and how he has gone about learning; how he thinks, questions, analyzes, synthesizes, produces, and creates; and how he interacts – intellectually, emotionally and socially – with others (Grace & Cathy, 1992). According to Arter and Spandel (1991), portfolio is a powerful collection of a child's work that can be used to document the child's efforts, progress, and achievements over time. Portfolios often demonstrate to parents child skills of which they were unaware and teach parents how to interpret their children's work (Meisels, 1993; Neuman & Roskos, 1993).

Portfolios are open-ended and flexible. The content of the portfolio depends on educational goals and purposes and can include a variety of children's work as well as teach and parent observations. Ideally, a portfolio includes observations in several or all of the following forms:

- i. anecdotal records – factual, non-judgemental notes of children's activity
- ii. checklist inventory – based on regular activities
- iii. rating scales – appropriately used when the behaviour to be observed has several aspects or components
- iv. questions and requests – to ask direct, open-ended questions of individual children
- v. screening tests – used to help identify the skills and strengths that children already possess so that meaningful learning experience can be planned

An example of portfolio assessment through (iv) questions and requests is shown below (p.g. 106. Losardo & Notari-Syverson,2001).

Child' name:	Date:
.....	
What I liked best and why:	
<i>I liked when we played restaurant with Amy. She's my best friend. I was the cook. I was cooking pizza and new potatoes.</i>	
What I liked the least and why:	
<i>Telling a story. That's a lot of words and sentences to tell someone.</i>	
What I learned:	
<i>That's my picture of Abiyoyo. I learned a lot about Africa.</i>	
What was difficult and why:	

*It was hard to draw the caterpillar and the butterfly. I got the colors mixed up.
I coloured the butterfly green.*

What I want to learn to do better and how:

I want to write my name. You can show me, then I can copy.

ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN WITH LD

Emphasis on assessment of children with learning disabilities lies in the service of prevention, of teaching, and of mainstreaming and integration (Cline, 1992). It is not enough to understand children's individual strengths and weaknesses. The primary objective of assessment is to guide intervention, and for that purpose it must have a broader focus and not concentrate exclusively on the target individuals who appear to have disabilities or learning difficulties. Assessment outcomes should specify the child's repertoire in important areas of development as well as collect information on the child's social and physical environment (Losardo & Notari-Syverson, 2001). The proper concern of assessment is redefined in relation to teaching and learning processes. Much less attention is given to learning outcomes: what children have achieved by the end of, for example, a period of teaching (Webster, 1992).

Teachers should be aware of why they are measuring a child's performance before choosing an assessment instrument. For example, a standardized test may serve the purpose of comparing a child's performance to that of a normative sample but it is inadequate to measure the social-emotional and behavioral domains of children with LD. Assessment of social-emotional and behavioural problems among children with LD are of utmost importance because these psychological factors have great impact on their learning. For example, a child who could not stay focus or who is daydreaming would not be able to benefit from instruction. These inadequacies need to be identified so that effective intervention strategies could be adopted in teaching and learning. A holistic assessment of children with learning disabilities should look into the social-emotional and behavioral factors besides cognitive domain.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHARACTERISTICS AMONG CHILDREN WITH LD

Children with LD are also known as children with learning difficulties or problems. They are noted to have poor attainments such as reading, writing, and poor strategies in using knowledge and skills, such as social skills, than other children of their age. Galloway and Goodwin (1987) linked poor social skills with behavioral difficulties or problems in which the pupils lacked the inter-personal skills to ease themselves out of difficult situations in class and became labeled as 'disruptives'.

Research findings by Croll and Moses (1985) suggest that teachers attributed learning difficulties to mainly 'within-child' factors, and behavioural difficulties to causal factors related to home and parental circumstances. The researchers concluded that with both

kinds of difficulty there was considerable overlap between the causal factors. Other behavioural difficulties are often provoked by a seeming lack of relevance of the curriculum being offered. At times of personal or family stress some children may 'act out' their distress whilst others tend to repress it (Montgomery, 1990). This pattern of response is commonly observed in the classroom observation studies. We do not know whether some behavioural difficulties were a response to hidden or undiagnosed learning disabilities.

There are many interrelated factors which can contribute to a child's learning maladjustment. These factors need to be identified for effective teaching and learning to take place. Hickson, Blackman and Reis (1995) suggested beginning an assessment on children with LD by closely examining the characteristics of the pupils: (1) social characteristics, e.g. adaptive behaviour, (2) learning characteristics, e.g. motivational variables, attentional variables, etc, (3) affective characteristics, e.g. personality factors. The identification of these characteristics is done by an interdisciplinary team as well as teachers. It provides a fairly comprehensive overview of a pupil's learning and behavioural characteristics that might influence instruction.

It is not possible to separate explanations of learning difficulties from social-emotional and behavioural characteristic; the relationship is interactive, shaping one another. Learning requires self-discipline and effort. Once the child lacks emotional maturity, he lacks the self-discipline and the effort. Harris and Sipay (1980) list several types of emotional reactions that appear in a child's social and behavioural manners which may affect his learning such as overt extreme restlessness or distractibility, clinging to dependency, absorption in a private world. As Taylor (1995) points out, it is hard to imagine a child with reading difficulties who has no emotional scars because they are forced to face the reality of their failures whether they want to or not. Once failure occurs, it begins its own self-perpetuating course. The key to dealing with psycho-emotional problems is motivation. When motivation is low, for whatever reasons, pupils have little enthusiasm in efforts to help themselves.

There has been an increasing recognition of the fact that pupil behavior does not occur in a vacuum, and that it can only be fully understood in the context within which it arises, and that behaviour adjustment depends upon the situation (Gersch, 1992). Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that definitions of behavioural difficulty are relative to the context in which they arise, and that a proper assessment of complaints or problems must take into account a number of different perspectives, including that of the child, the family, the teacher and other relevant people.

ASSESSMENT MODEL FOR SOCIAL-EMOTION AND BEHAVIOR FACTORS

We suggest an assessment model based on portfolio assessment (Fig. 1) on social-emotion and behavioural that involves pupils as well as parents and teachers as contributors of information about the past and present context. They are also involved in the planning and reviewing of intervention strategies or actions carried out to reduce the social-emotional and behavioural problems hindering the child's learning.

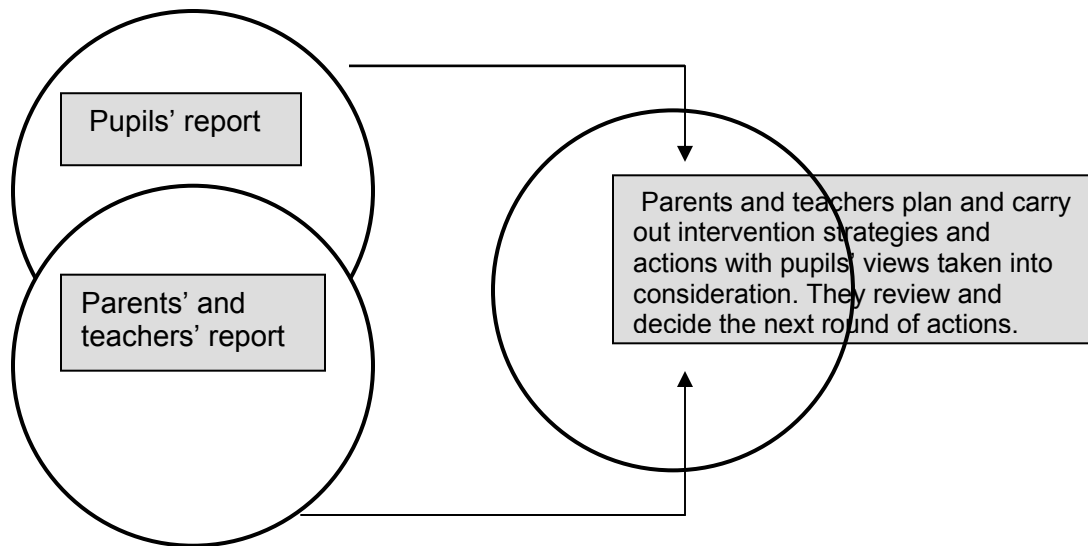


Figure 1: Portfolio assessment model on social-emotional and behavioural characteristics of children with LD

Pupils' report (Appendix A) reveals information on their social skills, personality, interest, emotion and motivation. In short, their characteristics on social, emotion, behaviour and learning could be deduced from their report. In cases where pupils are unable to give their written views, simple interviews can be conducted and teachers jot down their points. Parents and teachers assess pupils using an itemized assessment form base on their observation. Pupils' social-emotional and behavioural characteristics are observed during group work, communication, play time, games, pupils doing learning tasks and recess period in and out of school.

Assessment can help learning when it provides information to be used as feedback by teachers and pupils. Pupils' participation in assessment contributes valuable information for teachers to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs. It is obviously helpful and makes sense to ask the child what subjects they find hard to learn and what help they think they need. Form the moral point of view, Gersch (1992) argues:

“..... children have the right to be listened to when changes in their behavior and schooling are going to be suggested Some professionals may need to learn how to encourage children to express their views constructively, and indeed, some children may need to learn how to put across their views appropriately.”

Besides getting pupils' participation in assessment, parents should also play an important role in the assessment of children with LD (Appendix B). The importance of the family in shaping young children's social and emotional well-being is the primary influence on

child development. What is experienced within the family is transferred to social relationships beyond the family: the home environment and the events it occur within the context of parent-child interactions affect children's behaviour in other settings such as school. Parents play a vital role in education. They share with teachers the responsibility for pupils' success. One key to pupil success is parental involvement in the educational process such as assessment. Parents are the first teachers of their children and have a great impact on their children's learning. Parents play the role of enriching experiences to instill a love of learning and set the stage for lifelong learning.

CONCLUSION

Recent assessment on children with LD has been expanded to include information from a wide variety of procedures. Assessment should not be tied to the traditional psychometrically sophisticated and typically well-standardized instruments as defined by Hickson, Blackman & Reis (1995) to measure the child's intellectual status, adaptive behaviour, educational achievement level, communication skills, and other aspects of development deemed important for understanding his or her current deficits and potential for learning. Assessment should be defined as the subsumes of several source of data likely to contribute to an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the child. Halpern et al (1982) labelled assessment as traditional versus contemporary:

“...contemporary assessment link the purpose and outcomes of assessment with the goals and techniques of instruction and other forms of service intervention. Traditional assessment, on the other hand, is viewed as a practice at least in the field of mental retardation, has been to label and classify people (Halpern et al., 1982, p. 1).

Pupils and parents are contributors of valuable information reflecting a comprehensive repertoire of the child, thus paving the way for a more meaningful action to enhance the social-emotional and behavioural domains of children with LD.

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