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Educational Assessment of Children with Disabilities: A School-level Approach

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My friend's daughter, Sarah (pseudonym) was diagnosed with high functioning autism spectrum disorder shortly after her third birthday. The news was devastating for the parents; however, over time they came to accept their daughter's "normal" behavior would always differ from that of a neurotypical child of the same age. Sarah is attending a public elementary school, in which she continually grows in her academic and social abilities. The educators, in conjunction with the parents, have played a vital role in fostering this constructive academic progress. Sarah's classroom teacher is aware of her abilities, with formative and summative assessment forming an ongoing component vital to long-term academic success. Despite Sarah having atypical neural functioning which subsequently influences her learning, both the teacher and my friend are united in their belief that her potential is substantial, regardless of her educational needs differing to those of her peers.

In the instance of a child with special needs, parents, educators and carers can be presented with a complex set of challenges when deciding on the best way to assist the



individual. Comparatively, the ongoing assessment required for a child with disabilities is far more complex and varied than that of a neurotypical young person. This may be attributed to the unique ways in which each child develops physically and cognitively, with no two children being quite the same (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2012). Standard classroom assessment is insufficient to cater for a student with special needs; knowledge and understanding of the child's specific disability, and, as always, a significant understanding and insight of the individual, is necessary to provide for the student's inimitable needs, whilst enforcing high, but realistic, goals within the classroom setting (Gregg, 2009). This paper considers effective assessment with particular attention given to the challenge of assessing the educational development of children with special needs, using *Children with Neurodevelopment Disabilities* as a point of reference, a publication in which the editors have striven to collate contemporary essential knowledge and guidance to best inform how to care for children with disabilities.

The Purpose of Assessment

Education assessment strives to evaluate a student's learning (Earl, 2003). When considering whether or not the individual understands a specific concept, assessment becomes more substantial than just a simple 'yes' or 'no'. The assessment seeks to provide greater depth to the overall educational profile of each student. Assessment aims to diagnose learning difficulties, monitor skill acquisition, considers an individual's strengths and weaknesses, and detects incorrect learning (Wiggins, 1993). Furthermore, Wiggins purports that the function of assessment should be greater than the role of auditing; it should improve student performance through an intimate understanding of the individual's cognitive



rationale to his/her answer. Understanding the student's thought process is achieved through formative assessment, which occurs spontaneously in the learning environment in response to lesson content and stimulus (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). During formative assessment, the teacher may question how a student obtained an answer, paying close attention to the method and logic involved. A key advantage of this manner of assessment is the ability of the teacher to provide useful feedback to the student throughout the learning process. Feedback is critical, as it ensures students are on task, and, where appropriate, can extend the learning (Torrance & Pryor).

An alternative method to evaluate learning is summative assessment. Summative assessment is most often delivered in the form of standardised evaluations, such as an IQ test. Typically, summative assessment is administered during a prearranged point in time as a stand-alone test, which can be employed for teacher accountability to external parties, such as departments of education or parents (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009). National or State examinations administered in the form of a standardised test are classified as summative assessments, as are end-of-unit and end-of-semester examinations (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Numerous studies recognise standardised testing limitations and explicate the necessity of employing this style of assessment only as a rough guide of ability, and not the exclusive source of measurement pertaining to an individual's academic aptitude (Neal & Schanzenback, 2010; Pope, Green, & Johnson, 2009; Popham, 1999; Rothstein, 2010).

Assessing Children with Special Needs

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. For instance, a standardized written test would not be relevant for a disabled student who has delayed or inhibited language acquisition. In this hypothetical, seeking a verbal justification or response is also problematic. Subsequently, it is essential for the educator to understand the idiosyncrasies of the student's disability, and have a solid knowledge of his/her potential to ensure content is relevant whilst still being challenging. Although development may be delayed, it does not mean that some learning in the area is impossible, but rather that it is different to the expected ability at that chronological age.

Despite more clinical relevance, *Children with Neurodevelopment Disabilities* offers a guide to insightful assessment methods which educators can employ to ascertain the abilities of a child with special needs. Knowledge of the student's disability is essential prior to the commencement of the teaching-learning process, as this allows educators to be aware of possible challenges to learning, in addition to some relevant preparation regarding how best such challenges may be overcome. The editors emphasize the necessity of liaising with the parents to quickly deduce a substantial amount of valuable information regarding the child. This includes strengths and weaknesses, behavioral problems, particular interests, medication, and current functional and cognitive abilities. Parents are an invaluable source of information and support in the quest to provide the most fulfilling education for a student with special needs (Will, 1985). Thus, ongoing communication between parents and educators is encouraged.

Most desired assessment is a combination of formative and summative, however, sometimes this is not feasible for some students with a disability (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). After meeting with the student and parents, the initial in-class assessment is conducted by the teacher. This forms an understanding of the most appropriate ongoing assessment tools



to be employed in evaluating the student's learning (Turnbull, 1995). It also provides an estimation of the student's current ability.

Over time, educators develop an understanding of the child's personality and, as with a neurotypical student, it becomes apparent when content is feasible and is being understood. This form of observational assessment allows for instantaneous adjustment of content (Falchikov, 2013). A supplementary advantage of having a firm rapport with the student is the ability to deduce the emotional response to learning. That is, should the student be experiencing frustration, the teacher is able to redirect the lesson or to permit a short break. The knowledge of the student and his/her personal needs during the learning process is vital, as in some cases (such as children with Asperger's Syndrome) the child may refuse to reattempt a challenge if previous experience has resulted in failure (Fawcett, 2009). Detailed understanding of the child is imperative. Furthermore, in knowing the personality of individuals with special needs, educators are able to teach to the individual, as opposed to teaching to the disability (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2012). This is empowering and dignified for both the student and the teacher.

Assessment accommodation is another component necessary for successful evaluation of students with special needs. Assessment accommodation refers to adjustments made to the method of testing and can consist of modifications such as timing, setting, presentation, response, and scheduling (Gregg, 2009). Additional adjustments may include any alternate accommodation provided that does not fit into one of the five aforementioned adaptations. Assessment accommodation is not enacted for the student's academic advantage, more so it is essential in ensuring the child is not penalized due to his/her disability. For example, a child with cerebral palsy can be given additional time or the aid of



a scribe to record their responses. In this instance, the student may have similar cognitive abilities to his/her classmates but would be severely disadvantaged without consideration of the physical limitations to complete the test. Accommodation provides the most accurate and comprehensive representation of the true ability of a student with special needs, by making the test relevant and accessible to the individual (Abedi, 2009).

Constructive Cycle of Achievement

Mansell and Beadle-Brown (2012) recognize the cycle of low expectations that is often synonymous with the reduced academic attainment of those with special needs. However, the authors purport that it is vital to the individual's quality of life to replace this insidious cycle with a constructive cycle of increased expectations and subsequent elevated achievement. Although a student may not be able to perform at the academic standard displayed by their peers, it is essential to recognize that all children have the ability to develop their learning. Subsequently it is important for ongoing learning that the expectation of a student with a disability is high but realistic.

Children with Neurodevelopment Disabilities recognizes that approximately 20% of children have a form of learning difficulty requiring special care. Despite this, the majority of students' needs can be catered for by mainstream schools. This suggests that with slight modification of assessment, it is possible to further the learning of individuals with a disability. This belief is dignified as it does not impose false limitations upon an individual who may otherwise have prospered through a different assessment format. *Children with Neurodevelopment Disabilities* identifies methods and systems of assessment that best nurture and assist the intellectual development of individuals with special needs. The authors



have created an informative and practical approach for assessing these students. Ultimately, the publication presents a stance strongly reflecting the notion that “Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its whole life believing that it is stupid”.

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