

## **Challenges of Assessment of Students with Special Learning Needs**

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**Abstract:** The paper presents challenges of assessment of students with special learning needs. Challenges faced by teachers in classroom situations in identifying and assessment of special learning needs in learners include among many other needs, hearing impairment and deafness, visual impairment and blindness, dyslexia, mental retardation, gifted learners. The paper establishes that students who miss assessment are unable to access specific educational programs including modified classroom instruction, curriculum, tests and examinations. Learners with special needs can access these benefits only if they have been diagnostically assessed. The assessment of learners with special learning needs has deeply rooted problems, stemming from unclear policies, development of sustainable teacher training and teacher support mechanisms in dealing with the many forms of learning needs that the students have. There is also need for legal frameworks to be in place to protect the learners with special needs from neglect, social stigma and prejudice if the problems of assessment of these learners are to be effectively dealt with and the learners empowered to reach their individual maximum potentials in life.

**Keywords:** Challenges, assessment, children with special learning needs, special learning needs

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### **Introduction**

Learners with special needs in education require teaching and learning approaches that may differ from the traditional approaches hence creating the need for educators to relook at the methods of assessment used. In Zimbabwe, including other developing countries in Africa teacher-training programs have not generally empowered teachers in dealing with learners with special learning needs. This presentation will seek to critically discuss the problems of assessing students with special learning needs. The terms assessment and special learning needs will be defined, followed by the main discussion and a conclusion.

### **Definition of terms**

Assessment is universally conceptualized as a process by a means of which the quality of a learner's achievements can be judged, recorded and reported. Judgements are made through continuous observation or summative assessment. The assessors are teachers and external examiners. Zimbabwe is a signatory to the Salamanca (1994) international convention that advocates for inclusive education concerned with the development and provision of quality education

characterized by access and equity. According to the Zimbabwe education sector policy learners with special needs are those learners whose teaching and learning needs cannot be fully met by traditional teaching methodologies. Clark et al. [1] posits that curriculum differentiation and varying of instructional methodologies. Johnstone and Chapman [2] augment this notion when suggesting that instruction should be made relevant, flexible and responsive, leading to successful achievement and development of students as self-regulated learners. This therefore suggests that assessment of learners with special needs, should of necessity take these variations into consideration.

### **Challenges in the assessment of students with special learning needs**

Due to the technical nature of inclusion and the various special skills, competences and, resources required and expertise of personnel, in the assessment of learners with special needs a number of problems have to be content with in schools. Every learner is unique and should be assessed in their own right with special consideration to their circumstances. Challenges faced by teachers in classroom situations in identifying and assessment of special learning needs in

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learners include among many other needs, hearing impairment and deafness, visual impairment and blindness, dyslexia, mental retardation, gifted learners. Bahr et al. [3] postulate that inclusive education is founded on the belief that the right to education is a basic right and the foundation for a just society. This notion rejects exclusion, segregation or discrimination of learners for whatever reason from admission into public mainstream schools.

The problems that arise due to the adoption of these noble positions are diverse in schools regardless of the intent, the ultimate goal of educational assessment is to provide an appropriate instructional program for the student to enable them to develop and reach their individual maximum potential. According to Goodwing [4], assessment and inclusion are naturally connected, and that equity in schooling relies on both. Since the government of Swaziland advocates for the practices of an inclusive educational system, they recognize that assessment is critical to the achievement of such inclusion. It is acknowledged generally that assessment has a direct influence on teaching and learning, and that its power can be harnessed and directed towards positive outcomes. It is important that pupils with special needs derive maximum benefit from assessment to ensure maximum participation in school, and eventually society. However the teachers in schools are not all trained professionals in the identification and assessment of learners with special needs. In the situation of Swaziland, the writer's has observed that most students with special needs are progressing through schools without proper assessment.

Students who miss assessment are unable to access specific educational programs including modified classroom instruction, curriculum, tests and examinations. Learners with special needs can access these benefits only if they have been diagnostically assessed. Given the limited number of students who are assessed many students with special needs in Swaziland struggle to succeed with specialized programs in schools. The lack of school level intervention teams with sufficient skills to assess the learner different special learning needs at the onset means that some learners are left unassisted.

Given the apparent increase in the number of learners with special needs, at primary school level due to the free primary education program, primary school teachers are now more likely to encounter a child with disabilities and special learning needs in their classroom. The need for assessment of learners with special needs presents these teachers with challenges in providing better classroom support and yet teachers face a huge challenge in getting such assessment information for a substantial number of their students. Currently, the one main assessment centres are the institutionalized centre for disabled persons responsible for all

assessments in the country. The capacity of the single main centre to ensure national coverage is limited or strained and thus a significant number of students with special needs may not have been assessed. Zimbabwe lacks clear policy guidelines on the assessment of learners with special needs.

This contrast with the situations in most developed countries, where laws and guidelines around assessment articulate what should happen for students at different stages of schooling. In Greece, for example, the 'Education of Individuals with Special Educational Needs' law (Law 2817/2000) provides that the identification of students with special educational needs be realized during the first year of primary school. This law also specifies the use of a special screen-test system at the start of every school year by the local Diagnostic Assessment and Support Centres for the entire Greek student population. It is hoped, that, these measures will lead to an integrated Individualised Educational programme for every student identified as having special needs.

In schools, the learners are still minors and the need for guardians to authorize their assessment is problematic because these are not always forthcoming. However, if there are laws and clear procedures to be followed, teachers and school administrators will be able to refer the learners to specialist centres and practitioners to get help at an early stage. This is proven by the Greek case in which, students with special needs are assessed and placed in the regular school setting, which are considered by specialists as most appropriate for the education of all students.

In Zimbabwe, it is not clear who should be assessed and when the assessment should take place. In most cases, assessment happens by accident or does not happen at all. It is an accepted fact that assessment is one of the cornerstones of the successful inclusion of students with special needs into regular classrooms, a significant number of students with special needs are attending schools but are being formally assessed. As a result, such students are denied the right to benefit from the available accommodations including specialized teaching and modified examinations. These students then tend to struggle with traditional curriculum and examinations. Often, this in turn leads to such students dropping out of school due to frustration, failure and lack of clear career paths [5].

## Conclusion

The assessment of learners with special learning needs has deeply rooted problems, stemming from unclear policies, development of sustainable teacher training and teacher support mechanisms in dealing with the many forms of learning needs that the students have. There is also need for legal frameworks to be in place to protect the learners with special needs

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from neglect, social stigma and prejudice if the problems of assessment of these learners are to be effectively dealt with and the learners empowered to reach their individual maximum potentials in life.

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