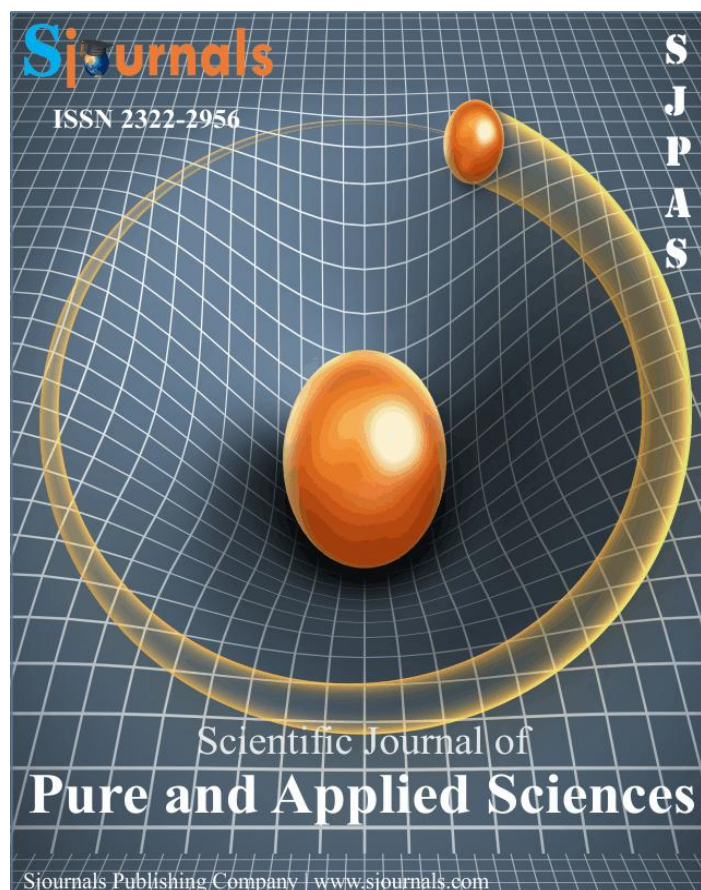


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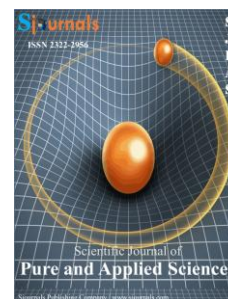
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Review article

Critical review of academic assessment of students with special needs in inclusive settings: The case of reasonable accommodations and adaptations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this review was to interrogate critical issues that relate to the academic assessment of students with special needs in inclusive settings. It was noted from literature that fair assessment procedures for students with special needs are those that are premised on the principles of inclusion. Since students with special needs are exposed to the same curriculum, accommodations, adaptation and modifications are necessary if the assessment procedures, including grading systems are to be sensitive of the unique and varied needs of students with special needs without compromising quality and standards. From this review, I concluded that assessment of students with special needs at whatever level is complex and varied since it depends on a multiplicity of factors. This review argues that, if reasonable accommodations and adaptations are to be achieved and the needs of the students with special needs are to be met, then governments should be committed to policies that harmonise the instructional and assessment processes to avoid content and culturally invalid assessments. These policies should also come up with alternative pathways to the livelihoods of the students. Ultimately, such change processes would call for governments, particularly in developing countries, to be prepared to increase their funding of inclusion and related expectations.

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1. Introduction

A lot has been researched on and said about inclusion, a philosophy and educational practice which encourages full participation and success for all students including students with special needs. Interestingly, not much has been said in terms of how the students with special needs should be academically assessed. If anything, so many controversies have been raised pointing to the complexity of the issue. This review analyses the reasonable accommodations and adaptations that are necessary for fair assessment of students with special needs in inclusive settings. A critical analysis of assessment procedures, including grading systems, is presented and an argument for fair and transparent policy driven assessment processes which are guided by philosophical discourses in inclusion is proposed.

2. The philosophy of inclusion

A growing body of knowledge and research point to the efficacy of educating students with special needs within inclusive contexts. Inclusion is the educational philosophy that provides all students with community membership and greater opportunities for academic and social achievement (NVPIE, 2016). The fundamental principle of inclusive contexts in this regard is that all students should learn together and be subjected to similar educational outcomes (UNESCO, 1994) notwithstanding the need for adaptations and other supports to create a level playing field for students with special needs. In this context, Meijer (2003: 9) regards inclusive contexts as ‘... those educational settings where (students) with special needs follow the largest part of the curriculum in the mainstream class alongside peers without special educational needs...’ Thus inclusion is about ensuring that all students including those with special needs are educated at their nearest institutions of learning together with their peers without special needs and that each and every student feels welcome and has his/her unique learning needs attended to (NVPIE, 2016). UNESCO (2005) elucidates that inclusion is viewed as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities and reducing exclusion within and from education. Therefore, inclusive contexts are the most effective means of combating discriminating attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all UNESCO, 1994). Student-centered and sound individualised pedagogies are required in these regards.

The aforesaid implies that educating students with special needs in inclusive contexts require teaching and assessment strategies that respond to individual needs. It requires appropriate environmental, curriculum and adjustments/adaptations which do not compromise educational outcomes. UNESCO (2009:10) asserts, “Looking at education through an inclusive lens implies a shift from seeing the child as the problem to seeing the education system as the problem. In other words, for UNESCO, inclusion is a dynamic approach of responding positively to student diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems but as opportunities for enriching learning. This is corroborated through utilization of pedagogical and assessment strategies that do not compromise the quality of education. So, inclusive contexts offer possibilities and opportunities for a wide range of methods of instruction, and assessment that ensure that no candidate is excluded from meaningful participation in school and community (Peters, 2004). For UNESCO (1994), this entails giving extra support to ensure effective education. In addition, inclusion ensures that students with special needs have effective access to and receive education and training that prepares them for employment and recreation opportunities (UN, 1989). Inclusion has been seen as the best way of ensuring educational success for students with special needs without watering down the curriculum. For NVPIE (2016), at the fundamental level, inclusion is about fairness, that is, about responding to each student’s needs. For student teachers with special needs this would entail assessment that is framed on a differentiated curriculum that is flexible and responsive to diverse students’ needs. For that matter, the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) is emphatic about the necessity of providing education for all children, youth and adults that is responsive to their needs and relevant to their lives. In other words, inclusion is a philosophy of acceptance or a philosophy of tolerance and flexibility.

3. Inclusive curriculum

In inclusive contexts, students with special needs are subjected to the general curriculum. In the same vein NVPIE (2016) implores that research shows that most students with special needs learn and perform better when

exposed to the richness of the general education curriculum provided the appropriate strategies and accommodations are in place. In other words, inclusive contexts need to ensure that each student, whether has special needs or not, receives individualized attention, accommodations and supports that will result in meaningful learning outputs. According to the EFA (2005) Report, one way to move towards a relevant balanced set of aims of education is to analyse the curriculum in terms of inclusion. The Report further posits that an inclusive approach to curriculum policy recognizes that while every learner has unique and multiple needs, everyone should benefit from a commonly accepted level of quality education. Thus the curriculum should be differentiated in order to accommodate all students and assessment should take cognizance of this fact. For UNESCO (2005), it is important that the curriculum be flexible enough to provide possibilities for adjustments to individual needs and to stimulate educators to seek solutions that can be matched with individual student needs. Such an accessible and flexible curriculum can serve as the key to the creation of inclusive contexts (Booth and Ainscow, 2000). According to NVPIE (2016), today inclusion is the accepted approach to the education of students with special needs because it maximizes the potential of the vast majority of such students, ensuring that their rights are recognized. It has also become the most preferred option in the new millennium. Even surveys with parents and teachers conducted in America have shown that inclusion does not harm the other students and as such, parents and teachers had a positive opinion of it (UNESCO, 2009).

Among other aspects, an inclusive curriculum should, according to the National Department of Education (1997) consider the environment, student-centered and interactive methods, national curricular and monitoring and evaluation (assessment) methods. In addition, the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (2003) calls for a curriculum that entitles students with special needs to all subjects, individualized planning and instruction, respect for differences (curriculum differentiation), variety of teaching methods, cultural diversity, success for all universal assessment and accreditation and varied learning opportunities. In these regards, UNESCO (2013) concluded that an inclusive curriculum addresses the child's cognitive, emotional, social and creative development and is instrumental in fostering tolerance and promotion of human rights and is a powerful tool for transcending differences. The education system has to take full responsibility to ensure that students with special needs access the full benefits of education. This can be achieved by ensuring that education institutions are equipped and ready to handle diversity through flexible curricula, flexible teaching and learning methods, reorientation of teacher education, innovative teaching aids and information technologies, responsive student friendly school environments and specific policy guidelines with clear enforcement procedures (Orpetti and Belacfizar, 2008; UNESCO, 2009). In these regards, rigid curricula, instructional and assessment methods and inaccessible environments technically exclude students with special needs from the education system (UNESCO, 2005).

4. Assessment procedures in inclusive contexts

According to Watkins (2007) assessment refers to the systematic collection and use of information about the students' levels of achievement and/or development in different areas of their educational experience. Different actors are involved in assessment and assessment information can be used variously. It is important to note that this assessment information is not only concerned with the student, but with the whole educational or learning environment as well. Thus, assessment is a pedagogic process and is also an administrative act as based on provisions laid down by law (Meijer, 2003). This implies that policies on the inclusive educational impact on assessment procedures, notwithstanding the fact that systems for assessment in inclusive settings are embedded in both the general and Special Needs Education frameworks of provision (Watkins, 2007).

UNESCO (2015) implies that assessment in inclusive contexts is directly linked to the mainstream curriculum goals. In this respect, for instance, formative assessment is usually goal-related and directly linked to the objectives of the curriculum for all students (Watkins, 2007). The assessment procedures are often the same for all students. However, for students with special needs there is an added need to link curriculum goals and assessment schedules to the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) (European Agency for Development in SNE, 2005). There is also the need for modifying or adapting the assessment procedures to meet the student's individual specific needs (Snell and Brown, 2011).

Similarly, summative assessment (which in the context of this study would mean final examinations) is equally important since it is used to make final decisions on the student's future (Philips and Clarke, 2010). Concessions such as the use of ICTs, Braille, larger print, Sign language interpretation and extension of times are some of the accommodations in summative assessment. In extreme cases, students with special needs can be

allowed to repeat an academic year or be referred for specialist clinical assessments. According to Watkins (2007:26) entitlement of students with special needs to national examinations and how these examinations could be modified to accommodate specific needs of the students should be an issue of national strategy. On the other hand, the author asserts that, just like in formative assessment, linking summative assessment requirements to the goals of the student's IEP becomes the concern of the teacher/ lecturer.

On the whole, procedures for assessment in inclusive settings should be hinged on national policy with clear statements relating to both formative and summative assessment (Meijer, 2003). At institutional level, collaborative inclusive assessment teams are necessary to deal with broadening the focus of assessment, to cater for all students, to develop links between IEPs and curriculum assessment areas and to develop a range of assessment methods and tools as well as strategies for modifying assessment without compromising quality (Madaus, 1988; Kneevs, 1994; Peacey, 2006). These teams would also deal with issues of coming up with appropriate grading models for students with special needs.

Thus, inclusive assessment should aim at improving learning for all students and the assessment procedures, methods and tools should inform progress and development of all students (Watkins, 2007). Watkins also implores that principles underpinning inclusive assessment should aim to celebrate diversity and prevent segregation through labelling. A wide range of assessment methods (strategies) including continuous assessment and value added information on student progress and development should be made available and emphasis should be on factors that support inclusivity instead of using 'snapshot' assessments to inform decision-making about the students (European Agency for Development in SNE, 2005). In other words, careful strategies should be employed in the assessment of students with special needs.

5. Strategies for assessment of students with special needs in inclusive contexts

The most critical approach to the inclusion and assessment of students with special needs is involvement of all stakeholders such as professionals, families, community leaders, NGOs, industry and communities and exercising multicultural sensitivity (UNESCO, 2003; NVPIE, 2016) observe that the involvement and cooperation of educators, parents and community leaders, for instance, is vital for the creation of better schools and inclusive contexts. In addition, one of the strategies is the promotion of quality education through the individualization of instruction. UNESCO (2005) postulates that in inclusive context changes that recognize human variation and difference are necessary to enable educational institutions offer opportunities for individualized learning in order that no student is obliged to stand outside the fellowship of and school participation.

It is therefore important to note that inclusion requires strategies to ensure fundamental shifts and change processes at both instructional and assessment levels. UNESCO (2005) is of the opinion that incorporating inclusion as a guiding principle typically requires a change in education systems. Reforming educational institutions into inclusive contexts is not only about putting in place inclusive policies but also about changing the whole culture of doing things. To start with, such strategies should aim towards changing existing attitudes and values, mindsets and inappropriate organization of the programmes and activities (UNESCO, 2005; UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2009). The institution has to ensure availability of necessary skills and resources such as assistive technology and work on making both the physical and social environment accessible as well as an embracing policies on inclusion which should specify assessment procedures for students with special needs. This calls for institutions to be willing and be committed to becoming inclusive (UNESCO, 2005).

5.1. Accommodations and modifications

An accommodation is a reasonable adjustment of the typical teaching techniques or practices to enable the students with special needs to learn the same material with the 'typical' peers but in a more accessible format (Pepper, 2007). Thus accommodations for instruction and for assessment of coursework for students with special needs may include changing presentation and response methods. The accommodations also include rescheduling of lessons/ lectures to allow for rest periods for the students and setting coursework in a different mode e.g. using large print or Braille for blind students. According to Snell and Brown (2011) modifications are changes or adaptations to learning materials to make them simpler in terms of level of difficulty, level of mastery, assessment techniques and in terms of any other aspects of the curriculum. These modifications may include skipping subjects or certain difficult topics, use of extra aids, use of relevant assistive devices/technologies, simplified or shorter assignments and extended times for both coursework assignments and examinations (Hallahan, 2012). Meanwhile,

students with special needs may be accorded special arrangements, such as writing their examinations in a more flexible venue than usual, use of Braille machines or computers installed with appropriate software for the blind students and signed examinations for the deaf students. All these modifications should be done in such a way that quality and standards are not compromised.

Wray (2002) conceptualizes accommodation, modifications and other arrangements as means of leveling the playing field in the assessment of students with special needs in inclusive settings. The author argues that when adjustments, accommodations or adaptations are put in place, the assessment is altered its implementation and therefore assessors should ensure that the fundamental focus of assessment remains the same and that it measures the same learning outcomes. According to Sharp and Earle (2000), offering alternative assessment may entail offering the student with a special need a viva instead of the written examination or allowing the student to produce a video instead of an essay. However, it is critical for the assessors to be conscious that they are assessing the same learning outcomes as the original method (Wray, 2002). Additional arrangements, such as providing a separate room, a Braille machine, a laptop and so on can also be put in place but these additional arrangements could be expensive since they require additional resourcing. Concerns have been raised that accommodations and modifications serve to comprise the standard and quality of assessment (Salend and Duhaney, 2002; Reeves, 2008). However, Salend (2005) argues that, instead, accommodations and adaptations are designed to allow students with special needs to access and make progress on assessment. In this way, Salend believes, they do not affect the level of mastery expected of other students. Gartner and Dorothy (1997) observe that in many developed countries it is actually a requirement that students with special needs are accorded some degree of accommodation and special provisions. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) cited in The American Psychological Association (2016), stipulates that post-secondary institutions are responsible for providing necessary accommodations when a student discloses that s/he has a disability.

5.2. Grading in inclusive contexts

One other strategic consideration in the assessment of students with special needs in inclusive settings is grading. Wood (1998) and Salend (2001) describe grading as a way of attaching value symbols to students' work and sharing information about students' performance. Although there are various perspectives on grading systems for students with special needs in inclusive contexts, Salend (2005) recommends one which is aligned with best practices, legal guidelines and individual needs and one which is fair, acceptable and agreed on prior to its implementation. There are strong feelings in some circles that having different standards for students with special needs will lead to a watering down of the curriculum and lowering of standards. However, Bauer and Brown (2001) posit that, if students with special needs learn differently, then it is only fair to assess them variously. The authors suggest fair assessment entails providing students with equal opportunity to demonstrate what they know and to avoid unbiased assessment. On those bases, Tomlison (2001) advocates for practices that foster differentiated instruction, enhance student learning and facilitate the grading process. This also suggests making strong considerations on how summative assessment marking or grading for instance is going to be modified to accommodate the specific needs of students with special needs.

In other words, existing grading practices and criteria would need to be modified to give more weighting to particular components based on student needs, for example, grading on the basis of improvement or progress (Munk and Bursuck, 2003). Perceived fairness and acceptability should guide the grading system and ineffective grading systems should be avoided. Reeves (2008) identifies the common ineffective grading systems as those that use zero for missing work, use the average of all the scores throughout the semester, or use the semester killer, that is, a single assignment to make the final decision. Instead, teachers/ lecturers may require students to make up for missing work or apply more weight to areas of strength or to assignments accomplished towards the end of the semester. Munk and Bursuck (2003) see prioritization of essential knowledge and related assignments, assessment of student's effort, incorporation of progress in the IEP goals, basing the grade on the amount of progress and varying grading weights as some of the effective grading adaptations. These ideas on adaptations of grading systems for students with special needs in inclusive contexts are in tandem with Howard Gardener's theory of multiple intelligences (Tomlison, 2001). This theory would enable lecturers to differentiate the curriculum assessment procedures and grading systems to allow students with special needs to demonstrate their areas of strength, that is, to demonstrate their other intelligences.

6. Inclusive policies and assessment of students with special needs

Policies on inclusion are enacted at the national level and are often informed by international frameworks and conventions and best practices. Development of national policies on inclusion and appropriate curriculum and assessment reforms are some of the critical factors in creating the right context for the development of inclusion. According to UNESCO (2009) the major impetus for inclusive education was provided at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain in June 1994 where the Salamanca Framework of Action on Special Needs Education was enacted. Other international legal frameworks that inform inclusion are as follows:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960)
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979).
- Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent countries (1989).
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- World Declaration on Education for All (1990)
- International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990)
- Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999).
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity in Cultural Expressions (2005).
- Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006)
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)

Many of the international frameworks against the discrimination of students with special needs were outcomes of the 1970s Civil Rights Movements of America and Zimbabwe are a signatory of most if not all of them. These frameworks are meant to ensure equal opportunities for students with special needs to participate in the full range of school activities. Thus, reforms in legislation and policy to support inclusive education both at national and institutional levels should be in line with these international conventions, declarations and recommendations (UNESCO, 2009). In America, for example, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (1997) specifically supports inclusive thinking and practices as it calls for the involvement of students with special needs in general education curricula, assessment practices and classrooms. In addition, No Child Left Behind Act (2002) bolsters the inclusive philosophy as it calls for the majority of students with special needs to be moved out of segregated classrooms and be given appropriate strategies, accommodation and teaching styles that match their unique learning needs (NVPIE, 2016).

In Zimbabwe, several piecemeal operational policies on inclusive education in schools have been published by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education but little, if any, has been done with regards to tertiary education at Higher Education Ministerial level. Rather some colleges and universities have, through their initiatives, established Disability Resource Centers meant to support students with disabilities access education. Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2001) developed a policy on ZIMSEC special examination conditions which directs Braille transcription for candidates with visual impairment and sign language interpretation for candidates with hearing impairment in schools. Other related policies by the Ministry include Director's Circular Minute Number 7 of 2005 on guidelines for inclusion, Secretary's Circular Minute Number 2 of 2000 and Principal Director's Circular Minute Number 2 of 2010 on priority areas and implementation framework for child friendly/inclusive schools.

Watkins (2007) advises that assessment policies in these regards should exist within a broad context of legislation or broader policies on inclusion. The author implores that these policies should be premised on best practices, provide educational institutions with on-going information and guidance, aim to promote effective learning for all students and avoid promotion of quantitative only assessment methods but support the use of a multiplicity of methods. In so doing, according to Meijer (2003), the essential purpose behind a focus upon national standards related assessment should be a clear policy intention to raise the standards of achievement for students of all abilities and to improve accountability and effectiveness of educational institutions.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded from this review that academic assessment of students with special needs at whatever level is complex and controversial. There is no definite strategy because students with special needs are not a homogenous group in a number of ways. The kind of accommodations and/or adaptations cannot be prescriptive because these would depend on the type and severity of need. They also depend on the environmental and socio-economic conditions of the educational institution or country. Meanwhile, issues of quality can also not be romanticized because there can be no modification which can be done without affecting the original setup in one way or the other. It is therefore important to consider that systematic quality assurance processes should be in place to ensure that minimal acceptable standards are met. It should also be clarified that there are certain needs caused by certain severities of disability that may not be remedied even with the best and most extreme accommodations and adaptations. These would call for alternative pathways to employment which may not require only academic but ecological assessment.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance that governments come up with clear and elaborate policies that ensure that students with special needs are fairly assessed but without compromising quality and standards. These policies must also be clear on the alternative pathways that are contained in the education system and are relevant to particular student needs and conditions. Assessment procedures should be clearly harmonized with instructional processes so that students with special needs are not unfairly subjected to content and culturally invalid assessments. Such change processes will call for a teaching staff that is well groomed in inclusive teaching as well as inclusive assessment. From literature, there is glaring evidence that much has been said and done about instruction in inclusive settings, but little has been done in terms of inclusive academic assessment procedures particularly in developing countries. Careful planning is necessary in these regards if assessment of students with special needs is to be inclusive and not punitive, unfair or even discriminatory. In short the assessment should be done within the threshold of what the students with special needs can do in the curriculum, within the constraints of their unique needs while at the same time it should meet the national standards of the ultimate qualifications. To achieve this, governments should be prepared to commit more financial resources on inclusive education and to reinforce and clarify policies on assessment of students with special needs.

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