ABSTRACT

Early childhood education (ECE) derives from a vast areas of disciplines; and authentic assessment for young children has evolved from interdisciplinary to multidisciplinary and currently, transdisciplinary approaches. This paper discusses the reflexive accounts of the author based on her experience, as an academician/researcher transforming an early childhood education practice in local context. The transformation from paper-and-pencil (P-P) tests towards authentic assessment practice was carried out as a democratic process guided by action research design. There were three cycles and each cycle had different stakeholders who collaborated to assist in the change taken place. Although the main data collection was quantitative in nature, however, through reflexive which data was qualitative naturally, the author found great discoveries about the challenges faced by ECE community. Some challenges were isolated e.g. teachers’ knowledge and skills which could be addressed through certain actions. But others were more complex and intertwined that solving them must involve greater collaborative research work by stakeholders. These challenges as by-product from those action research cycles are key components to assist future work related to the application of authentic assessment in ECE context.

Keywords
Early childhood education, authentic assessment, action research, reflexive, transdisciplinary

INTRODUCTION

Authentic assessment is key to understanding a child’s development, from which information teacher/caregiver can (re)arrange the environment both physical and social, to cater for individual needs. The lack of system available to directly implement authentic assessment in ECE setting as currently practiced in the context, meant that children’s developmental progress are left to the chance (Faridah Yunus 2013; 2014). Action research, a reflexive, collaborative and democratic in approach (MacNaughton and Hughes 2009) design was utilized to assist the author in changing the teaching and learning (T-L) process. Authentic assessment principles asked for collaborations between stakeholders (Macy and Hoyt-Gonzales 2007) and the process must adhere to the transdisciplinary approach, and therefore, challenges in the implementation became more visible during the cycles and more complex at the end of the process. Those challenges are main ideas that the author shares for future research undertakings.
OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

Authentic assessment is defined as an approach to collect and record data of development from various sources/media, through naturalistic observation for the purpose of planning individualized and or small group or large group teaching and learning processes.

Reflexive is method applied in action research design where the researcher constantly asking questions about his/her actions to avoid biasness in every aspect of the decision making process for actions to be democratic.

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT RESEARCH

The current study does not include major stakeholders at higher governing level nor it involves a great number of individuals. It was a small scale study carried at a preschool setting to start off authentic assessment implementation by changing the existing T-L practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Developmental domains can be classified into physical/perceptual, cognitive/language, and psycho-social (Berk 2009; Bee 2007; Papalia et al. 2006). These domains need to be nurtured simultaneously to ensure optimum growth and curriculum that are based on these principles also encourage appropriate space be provided to enhance learning (Essa and Rogers 1992). Play is an activity that is highly recommended by experts in various disciplines from developmental science to education for the purpose of developing those domains. ang sangat digalakkan oleh pakar di seluruh dunia bagi tujuan perkembangan kanak-kanak (Wood and Attfield 2005; Waller 2009a; Anning 2005; Smith 2010). Post-modernism reject views that are too rigid and infact, claim that knowledge must be developed together, socially and with justice (Atkinson 2009). Human diversity in all aspects must be given prior attention when developing curriculum Cole (2005); Gonzalez-Mena (2005); Robinson dan Diaz (2006); Papatheodorou dan Moyles (2012) and hence, assessment tool to ensure fairness as stated in the UNCRC (UNICEF 2001).

Authentic assessment instrument applied in this study is known as Assessment, Evaluation and Programming Systems (AEPS®). It is a Curriculum-Based Assessment (CBA) where its use is mainly to LINK the criteria in the assessment tool back to its curriculum i.e. syllabus (see figure 1). AEPS is highly recommended in inclusive settings because of its LINKing property which means the intervention process would be smoothly transferred from the diagnostic criteria to the activities. AEPS has six domains which are fine motor, gross motor, adaptive, cognitive, social and soci-communication (Bricker et al. 2002; Grisham-Brown dan Pretti-Frontczak 2006).
Note: A=Education program for typical child; B=Education program for non-typical child; C=Inclusive education

(adapted from Bricker et al. 2002; Grisham-Brown dan Pretti-Frontczak 2011)

Figure 1. The assessment process

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are three layers of set of knowledge (see figure 2) that has guided the research process which are first action research cycle of four phases; second research methodology for young children, reflexive approach, and authentic assessment approach; and the third is curriculum-based instrument AEPS. These layers were intertwined and with no distinguish boundaries; and they rooted from various field of expertise namely developmental science, education, special education, medical/paediatrician and also neuropsychology.

Figure 2. The research design
PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem arose in the social context where a holistic developmental approach to education intended for young children aged between 3-6 years was deemed not fully applied or applied at minimal level. The problem became more critical when the practice had not had the National Curriculum as its core guide. The teachers, like many other practitioners, knew only one way to teach – using books, worksheets, tests and very little of play-based activities were observed. Using Curriculum-based Assessment insrument could assist in not only in implementing the assessment but also the curriculum because th two needed to go hand in hand.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to change the P-P approach towards more holisic approach that involved sensorial-based and multi-domain activities so that assessment could be carried out through naturalictic observation to record more reliable data.

METHODOLOGY

Critical reflection or reflexive was the backbone of the process of implementation; which was embedded in the action research design (MacNaughton and Hughes 2009). Post-mordernism perspective of action research was a paradigm underlying the work where research process was flexible, emerging and engaging (Brown and Jones 2001). AEPS was used a catalyst to initiate the change and reflexive method had the cycles going and emerging. The cycles took almost a year to complete, six preschool teachers, about sixty preschoolers, 6 expert panel from the hospital-based centre, and six semi and professional observers.

FINDINGS

The Process

When the three-cycle process completed, a framework for the preliminary implementation of authentic assessment was developed as shown in figure 3. The first cycle of adaptation process inevitably requires experts from the field of developmental science/psychology; the second cycle requires educationist: teachers, trainers, researchers); and the third cycle involves observers from various fields i.e. developmental specialists, paedatrician and clinicians.

The first cycle of adapting the criteria of development, which was all in written text, involving direct translation, scoring suitability study, expert panel examination, and observing matched criteria in the setting. From the analyses, it was obvious that adaptive criteria were mostly needed to be modified e.g. toiletting adn meal time mannerism. Observation wise, cognitive domain was seen as lowly visible in the practice – this obviously need to be addressed in the training which must involve not only educators but also cognitive science experts.
The second cycle which purpose was to change T-L practice started with formal training and with the reflexive method the training became less formal and had to be combined with hands-on activities i.e. rearranging the physical environment. The hard part of the changing process was to change the social environment—that is to reduce the amount of direct instruction and policing among teachers. It was rooted in the social cultural context where the teachers grew up and/or live. When teachers were given a set of questionnaires, most of them agree that trainings had made them more knowledgeable and skillful than before. Visible changes were recorded in the physical arrangement and also children’s activities; less of P-P and more of concrete, and sensorial-based activities.

In the final cycle, AEPS forms were filled in by the observers when they observed the children during routines and activities at the setting. No interruptions were allowed nor were they able to request the children to perform but small cues were allowed to assist the intended behavior or activities. A reliability analyses carried out to measure the interrater agreement between the observers revealed an index of 0.17 which is very low indeed. A lot of work is needed to raise the figure and it should be a collaborative work from both the theorists in the higher education training the teachers and future lecturers and also the clinicians and pediatrician at hospitals.
The challenges

During the adaptation process, the author struggled to understand the lack of localized developmental milestones that had been established by local experts in the developmental science. The lack of rigorous scientific study on the Malaysian children’s developmental domains lead to the vast use of instruments/criteria from the developed nation. Not that it was utterly wrong but rather the lack of appropriateness to apply any kind of criteria/instruments without prior study on its suitability in the local cultural context.

The second cycle was a journey of emotional roller-coaster for the parties involved. Changing the minds of the practitioners took more than just series of lecture-based trainings. Since the lack of qualifications among the practitioners, the author had to literally sit down with them and slowly trying to make both sides understand the existing understanding of their own practice. When reflecting on the conversations with the teachers, then only trainings got more hands-on. Teachers needed constant guide and reminder; and to be there just for them to ask questions were crucial exercise in ensuring change. Lack of knowledge and skills were seen as a challenge can could be overcome through continuous professional development. This also had a challenge coming from lack of funding which was the result of low-fee service orientation.

The final cycle proved to be more challenging when participants or collaborators were asked to perform naturalistic observation. There were of clinicians at a child development center, and postgraduate students of developmental psychology department who had little knowledge about observing young children in authentic environment. Pre-arranged environment setting and asking a child to perform according to a specific criteria based on an instrument were familiar practice instead.

DISCUSSION

Breaking the tradition

As long as ECE is perceived as a one-discipline field and that it is monopolied by educationists who only acknowledge grades, paper, and pencil instead of creating environment to support the holistic development; then the system will not succeed in “getting the best out of the investment” as economists would value ECE. By recognizing the dire needs to improve practice by opening the door for other fields to collaborate from curriculum to assessment perhaps ECE may become more effective in reducing the at-risks children. Implementing authentic assessment approach in the ECE system needs involvement from all stakeholders from family, preschool, and also the agencies that are connected to and affecting children’s life. In the current research, the implementation was carried out in a setting and it was found that challenges were faced not only at the preschool with the teachers but it became more tedious when it involved experts and specialist outside settings. Although family/parents were not particularly studied, their voice must be heard in order to understand the children’s development deeper to ensure informed decision. The way those processes could be minimized in terms of challenges is for the policymakers to work with various agencies involving children to establish a mandated, comprehensive system so every party can clearly identify their roles and responsibilities. Otherwise, ECE setting is bound to go to the easy way to assess children – that is via paper-and-pencil test.

Future research

Research must focus on the establishing the developmental criteria; developing highly valid and reliable instruments; assessment procedures for diagnostic purposes; and also mechanism for funding eligibility for children who need extra assistance.
CONCLUSION

Although grades do make impressions on lay people but developmentally experts believe that infant, toddlers and preschoolers need to be nurtured in an environment that support the naturally occurring process. With this we mean that young children must be able to thrive safely without the pressure to score on paper, yet! Authentic assessment is a way to help educators manoeuvre the environment to promote holistic development.

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REFERENCES


