
Re-assessing the current assessment practice of children with special education needs in Europe

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Abstract

This article reports the results of the European 'DAFFODIL' (Dynamic Assessment of Functioning and Oriented at Development and Inclusive Learning) Project on the question of how functional and learning assessment systems facilitate or inhibit participation of children with developmental difficulties in inclusive education. Questionnaires were sent to medical, psychological, educational professionals, and parents in Sweden, Portugal, Hungary, Belgium, Romania, Norway, and the Virgin Islands. Interviews and focus groups were organized. Results (95%) showed that static standardized psychometric tests of intellectual, behavioural, and language functioning were mainly used, with the WISC-III being the most frequent test applied. Less than 5% of the 166 professionals in our sample used formative assessment and contextual observation to reveal learning or developmental potential in a process-oriented way. Experts were generally not satisfied with current assessment practices. Reported weaknesses included lack of time, human resources, materials, cooperation, and follow-up. Assessment practice was mainly used to determine whether a child should be placed in a special needs programme, a special school, or an institutional setting, depending on whether a country has inclusive education practice or not. Parents were satisfied with static functional assessment when its purpose was to obtain disability benefits (financial, special education resources, recognition), but were unhappy with the negative outlook of reports. The main complaint of teachers and parents was about the poverty of recommendations on how to work with the child. Our conclusion is that the current practice of standardized psychometric testing seems to contribute to barriers to learning if it is used in a deterministic or predictive way. In this regard, dynamic and functional assessment methods that are qualitatively oriented seem promising in addressing the issues of learning and development in a different way. The methods also contribute to an understanding of the child's needs in learning and development. However, interpretation and communication of assessment results in a way that emphasizes a more adequate and challenging educational intervention for the child seems to be central.

Keywords

assessment needs, assessment practices, dynamic assessment, functional assessment, inclusive education, special education needs

The DAFFODIL (Dynamic Assessment of Functioning and Oriented at Development and Inclusive Learning) Project is a consortium of eight partners in six European countries and a United Kingdom Overseas Territory in the Caribbean, aiming to improve assessment and coaching procedures of children with developmental disabilities in relation to inclusion. As a Lifelong Learning Programme, it aims to improve the inclusive educational opportunities of children with learning impairment or functional difficulties by transforming and coordinating three major assessment systems: the 'medical diagnosis' system, the system used in school psychologist diagnostic centres, and a functional assessment. Our target