UP CIDS POLICY BRIEF 2020–01

Assessment as a Tool for Inclusion

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Key points

- Empowering local schools for inclusion means providing them access to assessments that support inclusion of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) in the regular classroom.

- Foundational learning skills are the skills that should be assessed for the purpose of inclusion.

- Assessments that use learning progressions enable teachers to know what the students know and can do and what they are ready to learn.

- The SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program can complement DepEd's existing instruments such as the Multi-Factored Assessment Tool (MFAT).

Introduction

The Philippines, as with many countries of the world, has worked towards making education accessible for all types of learners. As early as 1907, education opportunities have been provided to deaf learners and learners with visual impairment with the establishment of the Insular School for the Deaf and Blind. Residential schools of the past were replaced by special education centers built within general education schools to address the needs of learners with disabilities. Quijano (2001,

2) described the "school within a school" model of special education (SPED) centers, a Philippine innovation in the delivery of educational services to learners with disabilities. The SPED center provides "a range of educational services, namely, resource room teaching, itinerant teaching, special and cooperative classes that promote mainstreaming or integration of children with special needs into regular classes [and i]t is staffed by trained SPED teachers" (ibid.). Each school division operates a special education center that serves as the resource hub for knowledge on handling children with disabilities and houses the self-contained classes of learners with disabilities (DepEd 2009). Enrollment in regular or inclusive classes is a second option for learners with disabilities, as attendance in segregated self-contained classes is the first option. Learners who were mainstreamed had to show academic and psychosocial readiness to attend regular classes. This practice has resulted in educational placements that were not age-appropriate and not consistent with principles of inclusion.

Though each school division had a special education center, the SPED center was often located in the town proper and far from the community of the learners with disabilities, several of whom drop out of school due to the lack of transportation support (Bustos, Echavia, and Manlapaz 2012). It is imperative that learners are reached through their local schools. This was the commitment made by the Philippines when it signed the Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action on Special Needs Education in 1994. The statement enshrined the

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fundamental principle of the inclusive school—that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of difficulties or differences. Schools need to address diverse students and their diverse learning needs, as well as become welcoming communities where learners access education sans discriminatory attitudes that commonly confront them. The push for learning side by side with non-disabled peers was further emphasized in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006) which was ratified by the Philippine Congress in 2008. Article 24 of the Convention iterates the right of persons with disabilities to an inclusive system of education in the communities where they live and that they will not be excluded from general education on the basis of disability. Support to children with disabilities will likewise be provided within the context of the general education system.

The current situation

The Research and Development Foundation of the College of Education, Inc. (RDFCEI) of the University of the Philippines (2014a) reported that despite the push for inclusive education, educational provision for children with disabilities remain in special education centers due to lack of training among teachers in general education on how to manage the students in class. In an assessment of Philippine schools on the readiness of the school system to address the needs of learners with disabilities, it was found that even though Department of Education (DepEd) Order 72, s. 2009 pushed for inclusive education, there was "an apparent lack of clear, detailed guidelines and training to support inclusive education in regular schools" (ibid., 39). Hence, education service providers believe that the best mode of educational service for children with disabilities is through the segregated special education center, where trained teachers can help the children access appropriate services and protect them from ridicule. Focus group discussions with education service providers showed their preference for assessments that labeled students, which made it easier for them to decide on segregated educational placements (RDFCEI 2014b). There was a general perception that the purpose of assessment for learners with disabilities was to diagnose the child's condition. Primacy was given to developmental pediatricians, psychologists, SPED diagnosticians, and other professionals who have the training to identify the child's conditions through the

use of standardized tests. Education service providers believe that labeling the child could facilitate placement and intervention in the SPED centers where classes were classified according to category of exceptionality. Teaching materials per category of exceptionality were also made available for teachers in the SPED centers.

Education service providers in the schools closest to where children with disabilities live lacked training in inclusive education, particularly in assessing and addressing diverse needs and differentiated instruction, among others (ibid.). An assessment tool that will enable children with disabilities to access education that is adapted to their needs should help realize the goals of inclusion. Proper assessment of children with disabilities should inform and result in appropriate placement, curricular priorities, and provisions for children with disabilities in regular classrooms.

The Department of Education released two policies on assessment—namely DepEd Order No. 8, s. 2015 on classroom assessment, and DepEd Order No. 55, s. 2016 on the national assessment of student learning. The former ensured the provision of remediation to learners who do not meet grade level expectations, while the latter ensured the participation of learners with special education needs in national assessments of student learning with the provision of test accommodations.

In 2018, the Department of Education released DepEd Order No. 29 on the use of the Multi-Factored Assessment Tool (MFAT) for first-graders "enrolled in the regular schools who may exhibit developmental advancement or delays or with manifestations of learning disability" (DepEd 2018, 1). The MFAT is a classroom activity-based assessment tool that covers the five domains of learning: (a) cognitive, (b) communication, (c) socio-emotional, (d) motor, and (e) daily living skills (ibid.). Through the MFAT, learners in need of special education services may be identified and teachers will be guided in planning and designing instruction appropriate for them.

Despite these developments, there remains a dearth in available teacher-friendly instruments that would allow classroom teachers beyond the first grade to determine what to teach and how to teach children at risk and children with disabilities in the regular classroom.

The need for assessment that links with instructional planning

For students with disabilities and additional learning needs, the primary purpose of assessment is often seen as diagnostic rather than developmental or, in other words, as focused on disabilities and the likely impacts of those disabilities rather than on skills and learning (Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergstrom 2010; van Swet, Wichers-Bots, and Brown 2011). Diagnostic assessment often relies on a norm-referenced interpretation of student performance, to direct notice to the comparative performance of students—how well or how badly they have performed when compared to others. This is useful information when the purpose of assessment is to identify the nature or severity of a student's additional learning needs. However, pushing for inclusion requires that assessment of learners with disabilities should be for the purpose of instructional design and decision-making. In this case, a criterion-referenced interpretation of assessment information helps teachers think about the skills their students can demonstrate, and to recognize those skills as the starting point for learning. Instructional plans for students with additional needs are ideally generated from evidence of student learning, which is described as a summary statement of skills and knowledge rather than as a grade, score, or comparative judgement (Griffin 2007). This skill summary must support decisions about how best to intervene in student learning and plans for adjusting the learning environment to ensure that intervention can be successfully implemented (Hutchinson, Francis, and Griffin 2014).

A suite of assessment tools for students with additional needs or the SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program was developed by the Assessment Research Centre of the University of Melbourne (Coles-Janess and Griffin 2009; Roberts and Griffin 2009; Woods and Griffin 2013) and was validated for Philippine use (RDFCEI 2014b). It drew on protocols for educational assessment conducted within criterion- or skills-referenced developmental frameworks (Griffin 2007). Its core assumptions were that instructional planning must build on a sound understanding of students' capabilities and, to guide that understanding, assessment outcomes must be reported in terms of the skills students can demonstrate, mapped against an expected skill progression, rather than as test scores or comparisons between students. Developmental progressions are designed to help teachers respond to each student as an individual who has attained a level of skill and understanding, and who is expected to progress along a pathway of increasing proficiency (Heritage 2008; Popham 2007).

The developmental progression in the SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program allows the teacher and the learner to visually see where the learner is and the developmental path he or she should go. Inclusion benefits from this way of thinking about assessment. The assessment tool should tell one how to address the needs of that learner in the classroom with regular peers as against putting him or her in a separate class.

The SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program provides schools and teachers with information about the level of proficiency their students with additional needs could demonstrate in foundational learning skills. The development of foundational learning skills is important in the discussion of inclusion. Foundational learning skills are defined as competencies a student needs to establish to support inclusion across multiple learning domains. It encompasses a learner's capacity to:

- communicate needs, wants, feelings, and ideas and connect meaningfully with others;

- use and interpret symbol systems, including pictures, letters, words, and numbers, working towards the development of early reading and writing skills;

- relate to and work with others in the social environment;

- manage his or her own feelings and understand the feelings of others; and

- work towards increasing independence, confidence, and responsibility as a learner through the development of attention, memory, and personal organization skills.

The SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program draws on teacher judgment and observation of students in everyday classroom interactions, rather than direct participation of students in testing, because test participation was seen as complicated or impossible for many students for whom the assessments were intended.

In the development of the SWANs program, teachers of learners whose performance improved were asked the strategies that they often used and these became the bases for the instructional tips given at the back of the SWANs Assessment Reports.

For the Philippine validation of the SWANs program, 67 education service providers—composed of 34 SPED teachers, 16 regular teachers, and 17 regional representatives—were trained on how to use it. The validation involved using the program for 778 students of various exceptionalities. A focus group discussion was conducted on how the education service providers perceived the use of the SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program.

The non-labelling of children feature of the SWANs program was perceived as both positive and negative by the Filipino education service providers. The negative view stems mainly from not knowing which SPED class to place them. On the other hand, individualization was highlighted by the criterion-referenced assessment; thus teachers did not compare learners with others, but looked instead at their development against progressions for communication, literacy, social processes, learning skills, and emotional understanding.

The SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program reflects a developmental or growth model in an inclusive set-up. Instead of focusing on standards, a developmental model identifies what skills and knowledge a student have learned, and what the student is ready to be taught next. It identifies the point of learning readiness for each student and assists teachers in targeting their teaching at the point of learning readiness and maximizes student learning. Its reports emphasize skills, not scores, and are expressed in terms of skill development. Because it is an online tool, it provides timely feedback to students and teachers. In 40 minutes, the Philippine validators received the assessment report after encoding their responses. The teaching tips at the back of the report assist teachers in using assessment information for instructional purposes. Reporting about student learning along a learning progression provides a definitive sequence towards greater and deeper skill development.

For the Philippine validation, the SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program addressed the need for an assessment tool that can be implemented by teachers which was cost- and time-effective. The results of the assessment tool guided them towards appropriate placement of and intervention for learners with disabilities. Finally, the tool provided them with a standardized system of measuring and reporting students' progress. The regular teachers agreed that the use of criterion-referencing in interpreting assessment results should also be applied to regular students. The fast and efficient way of generating reports as well as aspects of the report that support differentiated intervention, monitor students' progress, and reporting progress to other teachers and parents were well-accepted.

Ways forward

The SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program was found to be statistically valid for learners with disabilities and additional needs in the Philippines (Woods, Awwal, and Pavlovic 2014). It answered the need of SPED and regular classrooms for a simple and time-efficient instrument that could guide planning for intervention for students. The SWANs was originally created to support inclusion across multiple learning domains in a system where learners with special education needs learn side by side with their nondisabled peers. It could complement existing DepEd assessment instruments such as the Multi-Factored Assessment Tool, especially for learners beyond the first grade. The SWANs Assessment and Reporting Program could further be contextualized in consideration of the readiness of schools to use technology. Other possibilities include a paper-pen version or an offline version which may be lodged in division offices. The possibility of translating the reports to a language that the parents of the learners would better understand may be explored. This kind of assessment and reporting is viewed to support the need to challenge existing structures within SPED centers that categorize learners according to medical condition and the need to empower regular classrooms in order to accept different types of learners. ■

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