

Making Early Childhood Learning Pleasant: Coping With the Exam Anxiety

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Introduction

Early years at school play an important role both in the education and career of a child. Assessment is vital but challenging process in education (CERI-OECD, 2008). It is an important tool to judge the knowledge and skills acquired by the learners but assessing children at early age is difficult, complex and risky because children are very sensitive to the classroom assessment. Children are very sensitive to the classroom assessment so “there should be no high-stakes accountability testing of individual children before the end of third grade” (Lorrie, Sharon, & Emily, 1998). So it demands responsible use of assessment tools on innocent souls (Sattler, 2008). If assessment is designed according to the psychological needs and cognitive development of children then they participate very actively and eagerly otherwise they start feeling anxiety and fear of assessment. Sometimes such fearful environment leads to emotional disorder at early childhood. Many children during their educational career are challenged by stress and anxiety due to the high expectations from teachers, parents and students themselves (Greenglass, 2006). In this regard assessment need to be purpose specific and should be tailored carefully so that it can lead to beneficial results. In the assessment process the tasks, skills and competencies of the children that are evaluated and measured should reflect learning objectives. The National Education Goals Panel (1998) states that:

Young children learn in the ways and at pace different from older children and adults, so we must tailor our assessments accordingly. As young children learn by doing as well as by listening, so they often represent their knowledge better by showing than by talking or writing, that is why only paper-and-pencil tests are not adequate. Above of all young children do not have the experience to understand what the goals of formal testing are, thus testing interactions may be very difficult or perhaps impossible to adjust with that appropriately.

Assessment designed according to the psychological and cognitive development of children encourages them to participate very actively and eagerly but if not then they feel anxiety and fear of assessment. Faulty assessment system can bring psychological and social harm for students. Sometimes such fearful experiences lead to emotional disorder at early childhood. It has also been observed that despite suitably planned assessment process children face test anxiety. In this context there is a great need to educate children to cope with the anxiety and fear of assessment and evaluation. But it is unfortunate that parents and teachers ignore this part completely as they focus on “good results” only. In this regard parents, teachers and head teachers can play a very important role.

What is assessment

Assessment is a process of collection and interpretation of information about students’ performance to check their level of leaning, understanding and ability to apply their knowledge in problem solving. It is a process to measure educational achievement and change in it (Airasian, 2005; Harris & McCann, 1994).

It is an integral part of the teaching learning process and it is not only a way to evaluate the performance of the students but to guide them as well because assessment enables a teacher to take necessary step to bridge the gap between acquired and required knowledge and skills. There are two types of assessment: formative and summative. Assessment during the delivery of lesson, unit or course is called formative. This type of assessment is frequent, interactive, frequent, continuous and classroom-based. Use of formative assessment enables the teacher to understand the students' learning needs, to adopt more effective teaching techniques and methodologies, to identify and fortify weak areas, and to help students in coping with the test anxiety. Research has shown that formative assessment methods are effective in achieving high performance and in improving student overall achievement (CERI-OECD, 2008). On the other hand evaluation at the end of the unit or course is called summative assessment. Terminal or final examination is an example of summative assessment. This type of assessment is used to measure students' educational achievement at the end of a unit, and it is also applied to ensure either they have met required standards for earning school completion certificate (CERI-OECD, 2008). Summative assessment is the most common and visible in schools.

Assessment and its types

As assessment is a scientific way of understanding a child and estimating his/ her knowledge and skills in order to make informed decisions about the child (Sattler, 2008). Assessment can be of many types On the basis of its use, some of them are: screening assessment, focused or objective assessment, diagnostic assessment, counselling and rehabilitation assessment, progress evaluation assessment, and problem solving assessment. A teacher, in order to assess and measure child's knowledge, skill, competencies, behaviour, and personality, usually apply four assessment tools to make informed decisions. The assessment tools are:

- Norm-referenced measures: to evaluate changes in child's cognitive, physical, and social behaviour.
- Interviews: to have direct observation of a child's social interaction skills, and language skills.
- Behavioural observations: to collect valuable information
- Informal assessment procedure: To determine child's thoughts and perceptions; to estimate writing skills, and reading skills, to provide information about the child's achievement record, and attendance in school.

How assessment can be helpful in teaching?

Teaching, learning and assessment are inseparable components during school life: if teaching gives knowledge and skills to students then assessments let identify what a child know and can do, and what should be taught next and how. So it is evident that a teacher is the primary audience of assessment because it gives him feedback not only on the learning of a child but on teaching method, content, and assessment process as well.

The main objective of Assessment and Evaluation is to check the abilities and difficulties of the young learners for improving their learning process. When a teacher teaches a young one, he/she want to check through assessment and evaluation to what extent the young children have absorb the information and in what way they communicate. Through assessment and evaluation, teachers check the learning level of the young kids; also adjust their activities of the classrooms accordingly. If a teacher found some activities ineffective, remove it from syllabus and add some other effective activities in the syllabus. There are four major purposes of assessing children (Lorrie, Sharon, & Emily, 1998). These objectives are:

- To promote and support student learning
- To identify learning difficulties and disabilities
- To monitor the program and services
- To encourage sense of responsibility in students and teachers

Well planned, designed, implemented and appropriately interpreted assessment can provide true information about the educational achievement of student and can contribute the overall improvement of children's well-being (Snow & Hemel, 2008). The presnt scenario demands that a teacher must develop a test keeping in view the needs of the students, on going patterns and check these tests on some definite standards. Old ways of assessment are needed to revisit and improve for better results. The review panel Diagnosis, Assessment, and Evaluation in Early Childhood Education (2008) concluded that Evaluation is systematic observation of children's abilities, functioning, and achievements for the purpose of counseling, progress, and improvement.

Murphy and Torrance (1991, p.3) are of the views that wherever learning takes place, or it is intended that it should take place, then it is reasonable for the learner, the teacher and other stakeholders to be curious about what has happened both in terms of the learning process and in terms of any anticipated or unanticipated outcomes. Any evaluation must be based on the educational objectives whose achievement is meant to examine.

Traditional methods of assessment are not working efficiently in the current scenario, where a teacher take test, check it without any defined boundaries and mark it in hustle and bustle, rather, the demands of new era are totally different. Shepard, (1994) argues that there is a need to develop new forms of assessment so that teachers could support children's physical, social, and cognitive development. A carefully planned assessment program can have a direct influence on student learning by (i) providing student with short-term goals (ii) clarifying the types of tasks to be learned and (iii) providing feedback concerning their learning progress. (Gronlund, 2006).

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a complex combination of fear and worries and gives mental tension as well as has physical effects. This phenomenon creates unease and uncomfortable circumstance: a feeling of nervousness, apprehension or worry. Anxiety can be a normal reaction to stress or worry or it can sometimes be part of a bigger problem. It affects the emotional and behavioral mechanism and produce negative results in some cases. Anxiety can manifest itself in the personality of an individual, some of the symptoms can be; passive mood, changed body temperature, dry mouth, increased heartbeat, increased breathing rate, headache, tense muscles, sweating, loss of appetite, nausea, cramp and faintness.

Assessment and anxiety

Test anxiety is a situation of, tension, stress and creates a panic for the students. Negative attitude towards some subject, low level of understanding and over burden are some of the reasons of test anxiety among the students. Chinta (2005) in an empirical study on exam anxiety, found a positive correlation between high grades in previous exams and anxiety level for exams in hand. The negative effects of academic anxiety on students' learning performance have long been recognized (Levitt, 1980). At early stages of learning, students feel more fear of assessment. Though, trend towards learning has positive effects on the achievements, however, assessment fear is a fact which cannot be denied. Fear of academic tests is especially evident at the early stages of learning. This fear generates the phenomena of anxiety, which is considered as an emotional fear rather than cognitive problem. There are multiple factors that contribute to anxiety and stress in a school that may include; faulty teaching methods, complicated content, ad hoc pedagogy, lengthy instruction process, lack of activities, unsociable fellows and staff, and unplanned assessment (McDonald, 2001). Although stress is an inevitable component of teaching and learning but a manageable level of stress and anxiety is supportive to teaching and learning. If students are equipped with the proper skills to cope with the anxiety and keep it at a manageable level then teaching and learning can become a pleasure.

Current assessment challenges at school level

Assessment culture at school level enables teachers to understand students learning needs, to solve their assessment related problems and to guide them to overcome test anxiety. Information gathered through assessment and evaluation process can be used to shape strategies to improve learning and assessment environment through adjusting different factors related to learning and assessment. The appropriate cognitive development of children at early age demands an overall development that may include: motor development, emotional development, language development, learning skill development, literacy development.

Healthy emotional development of children, both at school and home, is very important for proper cognitive development. But majority of the schools are unable to provide favourable environment, such school are identified as "no ready" for early childhood education (Lorrie, Sharon, & Emily, 1998). It is a general practice in many educational institutions that students' academic performance is looked in the mirror of "test scores" not their class participation and overall performance. Therefore, students consider exams or test a tough milestone, consequently most of the students experience anxiety before, during and after the examination (Chinta, 2005). The trend of early childhood assessment is strengthening due to an increased demand of accountability and improved educational performance. Early childhood assessment system coherent with the curriculum, program standards and child psychology can be a pleasure.

Assessment specialists support that in today's classrooms, children need responsive assessment, based on educational goals, aligned with their physical, social, and cognitive needs.

Why is stress management important?

The goal of the strategies to reduce the effects of stress is not to eliminate the anxiety but reduce it to a manageable level because research studies have shown that a reasonable amount of stress can be beneficial in motivating children in class and exam hall. A manageable anxiety may be healthy to keep students focused, motivated, prompt, and swift. Thus they have better control in testing situation.

One of the main features of a good school is that the physical and emotional health of the students is a priority of teachers and administration. But in the real world students face stress and anxiety during their schooling. A manageable level of stress is helpful in achieving educational objectives; the relationship between stress and performance is similar to the wires of violin, when the stress on the wires is too low or too high then the required rhythm cannot be achieved (Khalatbari, Ghorbanshirdi, & Akhshabi, 2011). Likewise, if the test anxiety is too high or too low then children cannot perform better in the exams.

It is evident that the equipping students with the stress management skills can help them in facing the challenges at school and in the society. Such skills improve self-esteem and help them to achieve better mental health that improves learning, build confidence, and boost efficiency.

Strategies to cope with assessment/ test anxiety

Test anxiety affects students' behavior from pre-primary to high grade levels. It is important to provide students effective skills to manage anxiety. In different teaching and learning situations the nature of anxiety varies so stakeholders should equip students with a number of strategies to cope with the anxiety in different settings. In this regard, colleagues, parents, teachers, and head teachers can play effective role in helping the children to manage the test anxiety so that they could utilize academic potential in an effective way. Some of the important strategies are:

- Parents are closer to their children than any other person so they can help better in coping with the test anxiety before, during and after examination. In this regard they should:
 - Ensure the regularity and punctuality of their children during the academic session.
 - Encourage their children to discuss problems faced by them in school concerning to their social life and education.
 - Develop healthy habits in their children by encouraging them to take healthy meal, healthy activities, physical exercise, get a good night sleep, and have a company of good students (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003).
 - Provide energetic food during examination, as it will give ample energy to the brain to perform well.
 - Evaluate their children regularly and provide supportive/ home teaching where ever needed
 - Create pleasant, peaceful, and learning friendly environment at home throughout the year but especially during the examination period (Culler & Holohan, 1980).
 - Visit the of their children school, talk to teachers, discuss problems with them, share ideas and solutions, encourage them to inform about learning difficulties of their children.
 - Observe change in the behaviour their child during examination, if they experience test anxiety or stress then parents should help them to come out of the situation.
 - Try to appease them through encouraging and motivating sentences.
 - Build their confidence through organizing in advance "home test/ examination" (Reeve, Heggestad, & Lievens, 2009)

- Students can use various strategies to help themselves to keep the stress at manageable level and to avoid unnecessary mental suffering. With the guidance of their parents and teachers they should:
 - Make an organized study schedule and prepare well for the test.
 - Have a positive self-image; neither underestimate nor overestimate (ETS, 2005).
 - Never have highest grade expectations at the time of exam (Chinta, 2005).
 - Gain required skills according to the learning objectives
 - Engage in sports, plays some games or take physical exercise daily even during the examination (Tarrant, Leathem, & Flett, 2010)
 - Get teachers /peers or colleagues help if they face difficulty in any subject
 - Engage in positive self-talk through highlighting past testing success and failures, and its causes.
 - Discuss your anxiety and stress with your teachers, parents and others.
 - Improve test-taking abilities and practice it again and again (Reeve, Heggstad, & Lievens, 2009).
 - Pay attention to teachers instruction, listen carefully
 - Learn and practice time management (Mani, 2010).
 - Be realistic and tackle difficulties calmly and rationally (Schutz & Davis, 2000)
 - Never consider how others are doing in the exam hall (Cassady & Johnson, 2002).
 - Breathe deeply and slowly while taking the test in the exam hall (Paul & Verhulst, 2007)
- Teacher is an important stakeholder in the learning process of a child so he/ she should:
 - Help students in identifying anxiety and facilitate them to eliminate the causes of stress.
 - Understand child psychology, developmental needs and learning difficulties (Lorrie, Sharon, & Emily, 1998)
 - Design a test according to students level knowledge, understanding and acquired skills (Everson, Tobias, Hartman, & Gourgey, 1993)
 - Equip students with the necessary test-taking strategies (Kelly, 2002)
 - Organize dummy test to give the confidence, to improve test-taking skills
 - Give clear and detailed information and instructions about the test
 - Try to appease and encourage those students who feel anxiety or nervousness.
 - Talk about the test-anxiety in the class before and after the exam (Sarason, 1980)
 - Keep parents informed about the class performance of children
- School head teacher is responsible for whole process of education that take place within the boundaries of a school so he/ she should:
 - Stay informed and keep informed teachers, and parents about the progress and problems of students
 - Encourage teacher to use formative assessment and teach the curriculum rather than test
 - Motivate teachers to develop standardized tests according to child psychology (Wicherts & Scholten, 2010)
 - Encourage teachers and counselors to help students to learn the stress and anxiety coping strategies

- Discuss and devise effective plan to help students with learning difficulties
- Identify the students who are experiencing test anxiety
- Coordinate with parents, teachers, and school counselors to facilitate children
- Arrange lectures and workshops for teachers on “test-anxiety”
- Introduce test anxiety reduction program based upon study skill training for teachers and students (Denizli, 2004)
- Organize discussion group with teachers and parents to help children to cope with test anxiety
- Introduce relaxation techniques both for teachers and students to improve the school environment (Dendato & Diener, 1986).
- Improve the quality of assessment in the light of educational goals
- Strengthen assessment culture in school through teachers’ cooperation
- Make school environment child friendly through promoting student centered assessment system
- Ensure teacher cooperation and supportive teaching for the students who face learning difficulty or learning disability

Conclusions

Aim of this study was to explore some effective ways helpful in educating children at primary school level to cope with the fear and anxiety of assessment. Children are very sensitive to the classroom assessment. At early grade levels assessment is vital but challenging process in education as it plays an important role both in the education and career of a child. It is fact that teaching, learning and assessment are inseparable components during school life. The main objective of assessment and evaluation is to check the abilities and difficulties of the young learners for improving their learning process. Assessment designed not according to the psychological and cognitive development of children encourages causes anxiety and fear of assessment. Well planned, designed, implemented and appropriately interpreted assessment can provide true information about the educational achievement. Traditional methods of assessment are not working efficiently in the current scenario and it creating unease and uncomfortable circumstance for children in school. Although stress is an inevitable component of teaching and learning but a manageable level of stress and anxiety is supportive to teaching and learning. There is a need to solve their assessment related problems and to guide them to manage test anxiety. Equipping students with the stress management skills help them in facing the challenges at school and in the society. In this regard, colleagues, parents, teachers, and head teachers can play effective role in helping the children to manage the test anxiety so that they could utilize academic potential in an effective way.

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