

An assessment model

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Today there is growing knowledge about the development of children and young people. Yet assessment of children with developmental disabilities, especially those who have parents with minority language background, is a challenge for professionals. (Assessment tools and methods are usually not developed for this group of children. The child might have different cultural or language background, or different experiences than the norm sample of a test or other tools we are using.) The norm sample used in most assessment tools does not include these children.

The assessment model I am presenting today, is developed to;

- help systemise information in the assessment process,
- investigate different hypotheses and assumptions,
- help in analysis and presentation of results.

This assessment model is presented in norwegian by Espen Egeberg in the book

"Minoritetsspråklige med særskilte behov. En bok om utredningsarbeid (Cappelen 2007)".

(Unfortunately the book is not translated into English, but the title means: Minority language persons with special needs. A book about assessment.)

Knowledge about development of children with and without developmental difficulties is the foundation of a good assessment. In assessment of bilingual children knowledge about bilingual development and education is necessary.

The model builds on the understanding that the quality of the child's learning environment, both at home, in kindergarten or school, is crucial for the development of the child. The child is born with different abilities and opportunities, but the experiences of the child are essential for its development and learning. Cognitive and linguistic development occurs through joint interaction between the child and other persons in the environment. Social skills and language are seen as important parts of the cognitive development. The model includes pedagogical and adaptive assessment in cooperation with parents and staff in kindergartens. This is seen as a key area in the assessment.

Many small children with minority language background are referred for assessment. Often this is based on concern about the development of the child, often concern about social behaviour or language development. In this lecture I will focus on the youngest children, but most of this will also concern older children. The model is also useful in assessment of children without a minority language background.

Purpose of the assessment

Egeberg says in the book I mentioned that the main goal of an assessment should be to make a better match between the learning environment and the potential and needs of the child (Egeberg, Espen 2007 p.13). Traditionally the focus of assessment has been on the potential of the child. Such learning potential includes inborn potentials (the genetic, biological and neurological), but must also include the personal experiences, knowledge and skills.

A premise for effective learning and development is that the child itself is active. Yet, what other persons around the child do, how they interact with the child and what they mediate to the child have a great impact on the child's behaviour and learning. How we respond to the child's interests and activities is decisive for social and cognitive learning.

Those who daily spend time with the child are those who have the best possibility to give the child positive experiences through interactions, and thus support a positive development. (A change in the child's learning condition will imply a change in the environment.) The cultural environment, other people, the kindergarten or school are essential factors for how the child develops and learns. Because of this the model emphasises assessment of environmental factors associated with intervention and education as well.

Assessment of environment and cultural factors can firstly give information about the child's experiences. The fact for example, that the child's family is from Somalia is not necessarily of importance, of greater importance is information about the child's personal experiences that can contribute to a better explanation of the her development. This information in turn gives knowledge on which to build better interaction and education.

A keyword in assessment of children with expected developmental delay and need for special education, is cooperation - Cooperation between caretakers and those leading the assessment process.

There is need for extensive information about the child's experiences and knowledge, such as pedagogical or psychological interventions that have benefitted the child.

Pedagogical and adaptive assessment is a part of the first, and perhaps most important, part of the assessment process. This part should ideally be carried out by the staff if the child is in kindergarten or nursery school, sometimes in cooperation with other professionals. This part is the foundation for part two in the model: a diagnostic or functionality assessment.

Involving the parents and those who work with the child in the assessment process is not only important for information about the child's experiences and environment. Their participation will give them knowledge and understanding of the child's potential, and motivation to adjust the environment and their interaction with the child. This is a major purpose of the assessment.

Systemizing the information

In Norway parents must give their acceptance before a child can be referred for assessment. The person referring the child gives information as seen necessary. The amount of information will differ with the child's age and the knowledge of the person referring the child. Before assessment can start this information must be systemised.

The first step in the pedagogical adaptive assessment

Children are usually referred for assessment after concern about their development. They do not develop as expected. Sometimes a child will already have a diagnoses and an assessment is wanted to help make the transition to kindergarten as smooth as possible. All children in Norway have a right to be assessed concerning the need for special education.

Firstly the information given when the child is referred is systemised using the models four themes which cover experiences and background (themes I-IV) and a description of the child's competence, behaviour and learning environment now (theme V). The information is then analysed to find the child's potential and needs. The child's learning environment is a part of the analysis.

When systemized, the information gives a background on which to form hypothesis about the child's potential and needs for adaption of the learning environment. During the assessment period, interventions given by the hypothesis will be tried out and the results analysed. This will often give raise to adjustments. Cooperation by those involved with the child is a

necessity. Information during and after try out periods will be gathered through observations, interviews and testing of the child and evaluation of the learning environment. This part of the assessment is done through cooperation between those in the child's learning environment whether at home or at kindergarten. Pedagogues and parents try out adaptations, test and observe the child in close cooperation with the assessor. Pedagogues and parents should also be active participants in the analysis. Then they can make contributions towards adjusting hypothesis, consequences and further need for assessment. An important focus is what elements are necessary to best support the child's development. Most often a pedagogical assessment will give enough information to start parent guidance, adaptations of the learning environment and/or special education. Sometimes a more extensive assessment is necessary considering functioning and grounds for diagnoses. I will now present the five themes of information in the model:

I. *The first theme is Somatic and neurological factors.*

This theme covers information about earlier and present neurological or somatic/medical factors such as early birth, defected senses, syndromes, medical situations before, during or after birth which may have had impact on the child's functioning, learning and development otherwise.

II. *The second theme is Language experience.*

Language experience is important in communication, thinking and learning. It consists of more than the words, symbols and signs we use to communicate. This theme covers experience with cooperation, communication and language. This type of information is important in explaining language development in both mother tongue and Norwegian. Furthermore it is relevant for choice and analysis of language based assessment. This type of information can for example be first words, first sentence and other mileposts, verbal reciprocal functioning, language and language systems used to communicate with the child, what language the child uses to communicate, how long the child has been exposed to and used, different languages and language systems, the context of the different language usage. Information concerning use of language in the kindergarten is essential.

III. *The third theme is Knowledge and experience with content*

Knowledge and experience with content is what we have learnt about the world around us through relationships and earlier experience acting upon the environment. Routines and contents surrounding the child through toys, games, books and other materials also contribute. These are experiences form the background for new learning and understanding. Communicating new knowledge must be adapted to the experience and knowledge the child has from before. It is not always easy to differentiate between language experience and other experience and knowledge. This theme primarily systemises experience and knowledge that is relatively independent of the language system they have been

learnt. This type of knowledge and experience can be understood and used for learning in new settings and language.

Experience through daily cooperative activities (eating, bedtime and play) and pedagogical activities (games, toys and discovering alone and with others) give useful information. The same goes for the child's early relational experience which is important for social and emotional development. These experiences will colour the child's communication and learning in many ways.

IV. The fourth theme is Learning environment

Information about the child's learning environment is systemised within this theme. This could be;

- descriptions of physical and social factors at home,
- books and play materials,
- enriching relational encounters such as storytelling and participation in everyday activities,
- participation in play and games with siblings or other children,
- activities outside the home that are of importance for learning such as swimming, physical treatment or joining in at a playground.

If the child has attended a kindergarten, then the learning environment there must be described concerning activities and their contents, teaching methods, adaptations in teaching to meet the child's needs both in individual and group accomplishments. What competence and knowledge the parents and other caretakers have is also a part of the environmental potential.

V. The fifth theme is skills, behaviour and learning environment now

This last theme is used to systemise information about how the child functions in different settings now, along with an updated description of the learning environment at home, at kindergarten and other settings. Of special importance are descriptions of;

- what the child can handle on its own and when it needs assistance,
- the child's strong and weak points,
- what motivates the child,
- adjustments necessary for the child to achieve.

A natural source of information is parents and other caretakers such as kindergarten personnel. They can give information on the child's:

1. *competence* (cooperation, play, communication, language, interests)
2. *learning* (concentration, routines, attention)
3. *behaviour at home and at kindergarten* (level of activity, relations to grownups and other children)
4. *worries* about the child's development.

Descriptions of what motivates the child, its interest in learning and its learning style are also of interest. In the kindergarten, tests, observation, pedagogical plans and written reports give further structured information.

Evaluating the match between the child's competence and the learning environment is important. What adjustments have been made? Do we know what effect they have had? Are adjustments made for special settings or generally

through the day? Do the caretakers have enough competence to make the right adjustments? Are the plans for teaching the child good enough? Do the child's problems vary depending on the setting and the language being used or are they stable?

All this information cannot be expected from interviews, conversations and other more structured information sources. Much of it will arise during the interventions and the adjustment of these, following the process of assessment.

Pedagogical and adaptive evaluation

What is pedagogy? I define it as a systematic and conscious adjustment of actions and environment to ensure learning. Pedagogical evaluation focuses on how well the child learns and achieves given different adjustments. Evaluation focuses on what adjustments give the best outcome. The focus is not only on what the child learns in one setting, but also on to what degree what is learned is relevant for other settings. For example when a child has learnt to remove blocks from a tray together with a grownup that comments and regulates speed, to what degree does the child use this in other similar situations?

What interests and motivates the child should be tried out in different learning situations. To find out what interests the child, the information from parents, observations and trying out different possibilities will give useful information. Trying out possibilities with different adjustments can be necessary. Children who throw blocks given to them are showing an interest in blocks. This is a starting point for expanding the child's interest in blocks; giving and taking blocks, building towers, handling blocks of different sizes and colours, talking about handling blocks. We know that immediate, meaningful feedback from grownups as a rule increases the child's interest and motivation. Considering the effect of the grownups tempo, and different forms of responding and relating gives important information.

Observing specific behaviour over time gives information not only about behaviour here and now, but also about the child's earlier experiences and learnt competences (the model's themes II-IV) Through play, talk and varied activities the child will be able to expose experience using both mother tongue and Norwegian (theme II), experience with content and knowledge (theme III), and experience with the environment and adaptations (theme IV). Small children will often achieve better relating to their parents than relating to persons they do not know well. One reason might be that when relating to their parents the chosen subjects will be well known and give meaning. It is important to grasp these familiar subjects for evaluating pedagogical adaptation. These subjects will often be a part of everyday life such as feeding, playing with siblings, grooming, and cosy episodes.

Information from parents about earlier experience can give leads to new pedagogical themes with meaningful contents, and use of language for new situations. Would the child be more attentive and responding looking at a book with pictures the child knows from before? Which pictures does the child respond most to? Does the child expect us to follow its lead or does it willingly also follow others lead? Does the child follow other children's lead as well as the lead of grownups? The effect of adaptations in the learning environment gives important information. Evaluating effects of adaptations on daily life competence is equally important.

Systematically testing a hypothesis

A hypothesis is a possible explanation. This assessment model is a process in which a hypothesis is systematically tested. The more concise and clearly stated the hypothesis, the easier it is to test so that it can be either abandoned or adjusted and readjusted. When the assessor has systemised information within themes I-IV in the model it should be possible to form a first hypothesis. If for example the child's caretakers have referred the child for assessment because of concerns about the child's ability to relate to other children, the assessor must analyze the received and systemised information to see if there are signs that support or negate the hypothesis of the child having such problems. If the given information does not contain enough clear information, more information must be gathered relating to the stated hypothesis. Signs of alternative hypotheses should be used to state and try out these alternative hypotheses. Knowledge about child development is then essential. New information will generate a process in which hypotheses are either strengthened or weakened and some eliminated.

Conclusion and pedagogical evaluation

Sometimes an assessment consisting of the first part of the assessment model (the pedagogical adjustment part) will be sufficient as basis for adapting or adjusting the learning environment to the potential and needs of the child. It is then important to regularly evaluate the effect of the adaptations, to systemise information about what works and further needs for adjustment. The child's development must also be registered. Close cooperation between the child's caretakers and the assessor is natural during this first phase of the process. This first part of the assessment model will most often lead to discussions about pedagogical theory and use, giving varied possibilities for adjustments. By partaking in these discussions about evaluating effects, parents and kindergarten personnel will become more aware of the child's needs and their possibilities to meet these needs. Making necessary adjustments thought and evaluating their effect will be made easier. Taking time to share experiences and discuss possibilities is an important part of the process. This creates a fundament on which to continue.

Part two – diagnostic evaluation

The second part of the assessment model is called diagnostic testing or testing of functionality. After part one of the assessment model has been run through, different hypotheses will have been revised sometimes revealing a need for further testing of specific functionality. Before starting a more extensive set of tests, it is important to consider the goals and reasons for further testing to make a best possible choice of test methods. Things to consider are for example the what, who and where of further observation. Diagnostic testing will build on the pedagogical testing making part two depended on part one. Knowledge about tests and experience using them will form the background for deciding which tests to use. It is important to consider how to make the test as assessable as possible for the child through choice of content and presentation. Small children are especially dependent a known context. Evaluating the validity and reliability of the context, experience and language setting is important both in choosing form and as part of the analysis of the test results.

Conclusion

A conclusion describes both the child's learning potential and need for adaptations in the learning environment. Should there be need for a diagnosis this must be solidly founded.

Recommended adaptations must coincide with information and testing. The child's experiences also bilingual experiences must be taken into consideration in planning for the child's learning process. It is important to state the rights of the child such as paragraph § 5.7 about special education in Norway. It is often difficult to be sure regarding the needs of small children. When parents, kindergarten personnel and other caretakers participate in testing and trying out situations it is easier to follow through and make the necessary adjustments. Should adjustments not give the expected outcome it is important to consider whether they are being implemented as intended. It is important to reconsider testing and conclusions as well as choice of adjustments.

Writing a report

Those testing a child often write a report. The process outlined in this model gives a good layout for writing such a report. After background, pedagogical considerations and results of further testing are presented it is important to be clear about the foundations for conclusions and recommendations. A short summary followed by a discussion should be placed before the conclusion.

Why use the assessment model?

A usual complaint is that assessment reports in too small a degree take into consideration variables such as experience, knowledge of mother tongue, knowledge of Norwegian and interventions necessary for the child to learn enough Norwegian to benefit from the teaching. (Pihl 2005, Figueroa 2000, Egeberg, Espen 2007).

In my opinion this model's strong point is its stress on systemising experiences and the pedagogical evaluation. Cooperation between the child's caretakers is strongly recommended to ensure that the child's experiences (both cognitive and practical) are considered. Assessment of children with parents with a different cultural background can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions about the family. Cooperation with the parents is necessary for an understanding of the child's earlier experience, learning and development.

Assessment of children in kindergarten consists, as I see it, in too large a degree of individualised testing and interventions involving the child alone. Adjustments are made that consider the child's learning seen in isolation. Often a special teacher is expected to try out adaptations with the child. Such adaptations often do not involve the rest of the kindergarten environment. To help the child in developing relational and language skills possibilities must be looked for in the total kindergarten environment. Participation is a keyword in the new Norwegian kindergarten law of 2006. This means that all children have a right to participate in the kindergartens activities. This assessment model stresses assessing the kindergarten environment looking for strengths and weaknesses in its ability to help the child develop.

Development is a many sided process which includes factors both within the child and in the environment. The model can be of help to;

1. give a systemised overview of themes that are of importance to the assessment,
2. create an overview of given information,
3. reveal the need for more information,
4. stress the importance of the learning environment,

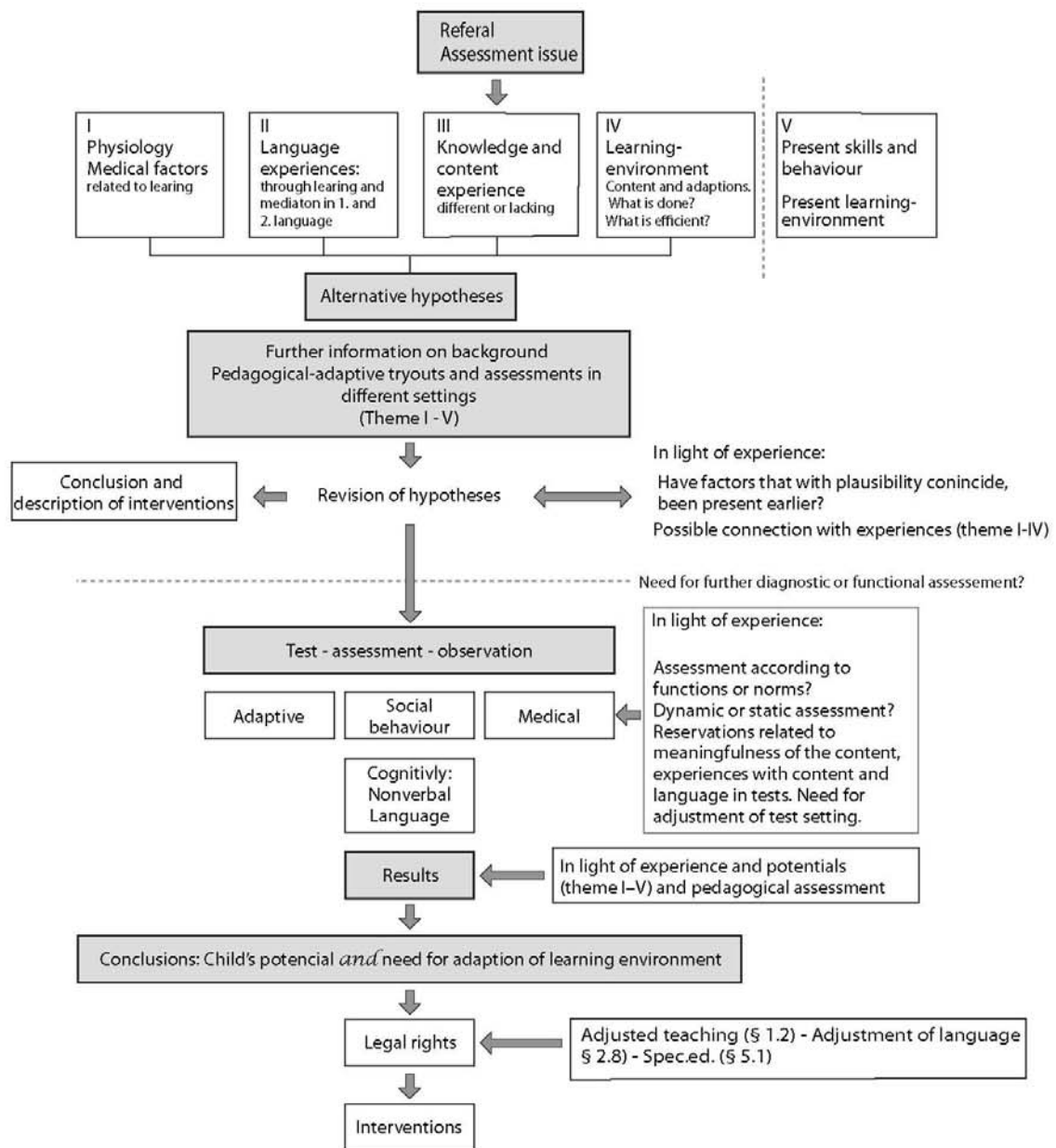
5. give an overview of the effects of interventions and adjustments that have been tried,
6. differentiate between what has been done earlier and what is actually done now,
7. create expectations of participation of the child's caretakers,
8. take the child's experience into consideration,
9. create a background for evaluating the use of test materials,
10. give the necessary information for adaptations matched to the child's potential for learning,
11. write a report (sakkyndig vurdering),
12. take into consideration the importance of the environment in the child's development,
13. save time and spare yourself unnecessary work.

References

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A model of assessment

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