



Special Educators' Preference in Assessing Students With Special Needs Amidst Pandemic

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Abstract. The study aimed to perceive the preferred assessment tools utilized by special education teachers with the new learning modalities in correspondence to the pandemic started to burgeon. It employed Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis which the researchers used to evaluate and analyze the qualitative data in the study. Moreover, the study focused on the alternative assessment, which branches out into two types: Performance-based and authentic. The investigation of the study entails thematic analysis, which divulges three themes: "Current Assessment used in the new learning modality," "Challenges encountered by the special education teachers," and "Assessment recommendation." The inferred extracted narrative of the five special education teachers as participants counted as a conception of experiences. (1) Special education teachers' preferred assessment caters to specific needs of the students through performance-based and authentic assessments (2) Special Education teachers' preferred assessment anchors specific modification in assessment tools through alternative assessments (3) Special Education teachers' preferred assessment encompasses available learning resources both for students and teachers. Based on the three conceptions, the following preference surfaced as promulgated: Special Educators' discretion in assessing students with special needs in an online and offline learning mode.

Keywords: Preference; Alternative Assessment; Performance-based Assessment; Authentic Assessment; Modification

Introduction

The pandemic's sudden occurrence has influenced changes in how education is done. The influx of flexible learning options has tremendously predisposed the way of teaching modalities in the new normal. Recent problems of teachers in choosing the formative and summative assessments in the formulation of the modules were considered a significant concern. Considering the type of learners, the modalities, and the learning facilitators served as determinacy for a program completion success. All learning processes in the chosen modality from evaluation,



testing, and assessment are done differently from the formerly adapted learning system. Special Education (SpEd), not excluded from being influenced by the new learning modalities, was also adjusting how they delivered their assessments during the pandemic.

In early 2020, Covid-19 changed the way education is done worldwide. According to Nóvoa (2020), school hours are unstable, and known teaching methods used in classrooms are no longer used; remote learning approaches are in position instead. Considering this, it has urged the world to develop education systems that will include all children and the youth, an opportunity to make a "new normal" for education (Ydo, 2020). In response to this, the Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM Report) launched the Scoping Progress in Education (SCOPE), a new online monitoring learning tool to complement a database on inequalities to inclusion and education (UNESCO, 2020). In another area not far from the State of California, Carolyn Jones (2020) stated that school administrators and teachers are preparing programs to improve the learning process of nearly 800,000 students with special needs to suffice their needs amidst the overwhelming changes in the education platform.

During the pandemic, the Philippines conducted a study on "Special Education Teachers' Experience in using Distance Learning Modalities in Misamis Oriental, Philippines." The study stated that creating reliable assessments was something they had a hard time doing due to the various tasks they were to accomplish, like developing modules (Abrazado, 2020). A study by Toquero (2021) titled "'Sana All' Inclusive Education amid COVID-19: Challenges, Strategies, and Prospects of Special Education Teachers" stated that Special Education services are being brought to the students by a joint effort between parents and SpEd teachers through homeschooling, use of modules, and online interactions. Most SpEd services are administered through printed modules disseminated to the child's designated area. However, there are some proposals for looking into the experiences of students with disabilities in using digital media and appraising the ability of assistive technology in the learning process during the pandemic (Toquero, 2020).

While there is research on Special Educators' experiences in using distance learning during the pandemic (Abrazado, 2020), there is scarcely any literature regarding what formative and summative assessments Philippine SpEd teachers use during their teaching practice.

In addressing the problem, the study aimed to explore the preferred assessment tools special education teachers used in assessing students with special needs in an online and offline mode of learning. The compilation of assessments was analyzed to determine special education teachers' preference in assessment during the pandemic.

1. Teachers' Preference

Teachers are compelled to share the learning goals with students. This sharing increased student learning in basic knowledge and higher-order cognitive processes such as application and transfer (Fulmer, 2017)¹. Frequently, students' preferences were investigated and given particular regard, which inadvertently overlooked teachers' preferences, especially on the subject of assessment. However, teachers' preference conferred beneficence as it impels the eminent learning progress of the students. According to Bano (2021)², education is seen as essential to the development of human life. Herewith, (Black & William, 1998)³ infer that educators can create many opportunities to assess how students learn and then use this information to make constructive changes in instruction. This concept is parallel to taking heed of the teachers' preference in pursuit



of giving distinct significance and function to outright educational affairs. This is parallel to taking heed of the teachers' preference in pursuit of giving distinct significance and function to outright educational affairs.

In addition, Gonzales and Aliponga (2012)⁴ forenamed that the assessment preference of teachers depends mainly on the purpose they have set for the class rather than their educational experiences. Hence, assessment preference has no regard for the teachers' educational attainment. However, it is primarily influenced and focused on supporting students' development. Teachers emphasized students as students' learning styles can play a role in their preference for assessment methods (Pantiwati & Husamah, 2017)⁵. Additionally, Birenbaum and Fieldman (1998)⁶ mentioned that students would be motivated to perform their best if provided with the assessment format they prefer. Consequently, students' learning styles and intelligence are grounded in teachers' preferences.

¹ - Fulmer, S. M. (2017). Should we share Learning Outcomes / Objectives with students at the start of a lesson.

² - Bano, A. (2021). Education-Significance, Scope And Prospects. *Technium Education and Humanities*, 1(1), 79-84.

³ - Black, P. & D. Wiliam. (1998a). Inside the Black Box-Raising the Standards through Classroom Assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 80(2), 139-148.

⁴ - Gonzales, R. & Aliponga J. (2012). Classroom Assessment Preferences of Japanese Language Teachers in the Philippines and English Language Teachers in Japan. *MEXTESOL Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2012

⁵ - Pantiwati, Y., & Husamah (2017). Self and Peer Assessments in Active Learning Model to Increase Metacognitive Awareness and Cognitive Abilities. *International Journal of Instruction*, 10(4), 185-202. Doi: 10.12973/iji.2017.10411a

⁶ - Birenbaum, M., & Feldman R. A. (1998). Relationships between learning patterns and attitudes towards two assessment formats. *Educational Research*, 40(1), 90-91.

2. Alternative Assessment

Alternative assessment, also known as classroom-based, qualitative, informal, or performance assessment, is an alternative to formal testing for assessing student learning with numerous distinguishing qualities. Alternative assessment is a method of assessing student learning that differs from formal testing in several ways. It takes place in the classroom, with teachers selecting the measures used. Also, it has a basis on a constructivist view of learning, in which the student, the text, and the context all influence learning outcomes. Then, it is based on the idea that learning processes are as important as, if not more important than, the final outputs, stated by Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001, 482)¹.

Teacher anecdotal/observation records, teacher and student reflective journals, student reading logs, tape recordings of student oral reading, teacher-student-parent conferences, and portfolios are examples of alternative literacy assessment methods (Garcia and Pearson 1991; Graves and Sunstein 1992; Rhodes and Shanklin 1993; Tierney and Clark 1998; Valencia 1998; Serafini 2001; Flippo 2003)².

Alternative assessment can shift the old paradigm of student passivity to one of student initiative, self-control, and choice. Students, for example, gather their work, select the pieces that best demonstrate their success, and then reflect on why they chose certain pieces over others during portfolio construction (Hansen 1998; Valencia 1998)³. Students engage in self-evaluation and develop learning goals as part of this process. They are no longer "vulnerable vessels begging to



be brimmed with information" (Wasserstein 1994, 14)⁴. Instead, learners are in charge of their learning and comprehension (Graves 2002)⁵. In addition, this particular type of assessment improves students' perceptions of themselves and the knowledge they gain that would go unnoticed if not for this type of evaluation. Other tests may distort this picture and provide inaccurate information about students' understanding. Alternative assessment makes this more apparent and, as a result, makes minority kids' education more personalized.

The study values alternative assessment as it focuses on recognizing students' perspectives and helping them to be aware of what they have learned and what they still need to improve on. Students define personal goals, choose work that reflects what they have learned, and can express why they chose it. Hence, students are more accountable for their learning. According to Serafini (2002, 82)⁶, we must "break the stranglehold that standardized testing has on public universities and Colleges" and focus on individual kids' educational needs, which alternative assessment can help. The necessity for pupils who possess the "freedom factors" of initiative, choice, vision, self-discipline, compassion, trust, and spontaneity, as stated by Graves (2002)⁷, is crucial. Alternative assessment can aid the growth of learners who exhibit skills such as (maneuvering and mastering own-made portfolios and other alternative assessment instruments). This assessment requires a theoretical understanding of why they are used, such as Children's metacognitive understanding of their accomplishments and future learning goals and responsive teaching.

¹ - Hoffman, J. V., L. C. Assaf, and S. G. Paris. 2001. High-stakes testing in reading: Today in Texas, tomorrow? *The Reading Teacher* 54(5): 482–92.

² - Garcia, G. E., and P. D. Pearson. 1991. The role of assessment in a diverse society. In *Literacy for diverse society: Perspectives, practices, and policies*, ed.

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⁷ - Serafini, F. 2002. Dismantling the factory model of assessment. *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 18(1): 67–85.

3. Performance Assessment

Assessment lays the foundation for determining students' progress and behavior outcomes, which could occur every day in every classroom (Overton, 2012)¹. In Special education, assessment amends the mandate stated in the federal law of the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2003. The said assessment pertains to focusing on the traditional assessment process of early detection of students with a specific deficit in an observable area that causes problems with their performance in education. Initially, as defined under Section 303(2) of IDEA (2017)², appropriate assessments should be provided to all students. Moreover, this should vary among their specific needs to deliberately develop their capacity and potential to the highest level possible.

Performance assessment as an innovative approach to teaching and learning proposes a new perspective. Specifically, in evaluating skills and proficiency related to a more complex, relevant, meaningful, and action-based performance task to ensure that diverse interests are taken into account (Linn, R. L., Baker, E. L., & Dunbar, S. B., 1991)³. In the preface of its equitability and efficiency, Elliot A. J. (2003)⁴ perpetuated on his study that performance assessment disposes of several schemes that enhance student's performance and achievement: [1] These are just a few of



the prominent contributions of such assessment to the educational field of teaching, learning, and assessment, which are the key to attaining success. [2] The study hypothesized that this approach was innovative. [3] It helped students improve their knowledge during the learning process while also ensuring that they understood all "knowledge points" correctly to perform well on the final assessment. Oddly, Pham stated that the interviewed teacher was genuinely concerned and engaged in the students' growth. Research on examining the link between organizational learning techniques and institutional performance in Education have been done. A study by Tafesse (2021)⁵ examined organizational, group, and individual level learning practices and their relationship to school performance in Higher Public Education Institutions of Ethiopia.

Moreover, the study concluded that when a teacher actively uses tools that encourage students to work for performance assessment, students' participation improves, resulting in a more effective learning environment that stimulates learning. These tools, according to the authors' aid in the delivery of individualized learning and student engagement through feedback, resulting in a more effective teaching and learning environment.

¹ - Overton, T. (2012). *Assessing Learners with Special Needs: An Applied Approach* (7th edition) [E-book].

² - Sec. 303.13 (b) (2). (2017, May 2). *IDEA Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*.

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⁵ - Tafesse, M. (2021). Organizational Learning Practices in Public Higher Education Institutions of Ethiopia. *Technium Education and Humanities*, 1(1), 55-78.

4. Authentic Assessment

Concerning performance assessment, authentic assessment, on the other hand, necessitates the demonstration of profound understanding, higher-order thinking, and problem-solving of students through the performance of exemplary tasks (Wiggins, 1989)¹. It is a performance-driven method of assessment wherein tasks are described by Shepard (1989)² as imitating real-world tasks that require the application of sophisticated and challenging mental processes of students and socially and individually generated knowledge (Brown, 1989)³. Authentic assessment has a growing body of benefits when used in the classroom, and special needs students are no exception. This concept is well supported in the study of King, Schroeder, and Chawszczewski (2001)⁴, postulating that students with disabilities respond well to authentic tasks and gain simultaneous improvements in achievements using authentic forms of assessments.

In addition, Choate and Evans (2010)⁵ stated that authentic assessment holds particular promise for exceptional learners to incorporate assessment and instruction relevant to academics and functioning in the real world. Furthermore, it suggested carefully structuring the authentic assessment to accommodate the needs of exceptional learners best. Hence authors discussed specific cautions to be observed, including the appropriateness and relevance of the selected task, complexity of the task, instructions and strategies, and authentic procedures that must be validated to be used by exceptional learners.

Furthermore, Awit, Garcia, and Pingol (2021)⁶ assert that authentic assessment is considered one of the essential assessment tools in a student's education since it prepares them for real-world tasks. Students will help discover their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses; notably, they will develop critical thinking as they will push to think outside the box.



In online learning, authentic assessment is considered the essential assessment method. Adam (2019)⁷ stated that the authentic assessment provides students with relevant knowledge and skills. Hence, integrating this into online learning would help, especially by equipping learners with real-life learning experiences. Apart from this, he mentioned drawbacks upon integrating the assessment into an online setting; this assessment requires a longer time to be completed than a usual quiz or test. It requires scaffolding over another period or number of modules since authentic assessment is task-based. Additionally, it might take longer to grasp or adjust to the new mode of assessment as students may be much accustomed to traditional assessment.

The sudden shift of the learning mode from contact teaching to online learning changes the assessment process. These provide teachers an additional challenge as they need to carefully and appropriately select assessment strategies to cater to needs effectively and at the same time provide learners meaningful learning experiences, considering the new setting. More so, Kearns' (2012)⁸ study highlights teachers' uncertainty with the assessments they employ in online learning as they strive to assess students accurately and similarly to the physical learning prior to the pandemic. In such cases, there are only a few studies conducted to investigate the assessment method utilized in special education amid pandemics. Thus, similarly to the general teachers who struggle and feel ineffective in assessing students with the learning platform, it could be as difficult for special education teachers.

With the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic, many schools worldwide struggled to provide sufficient support in employing initial services to students with special needs. Nevertheless, it is of explicit intention to look into a new angle on what assessments are perpetually utilized in the flexible learning so as the efficacy rate of such assessment to suffice the student's needs and meet the preference of special education teachers.

¹ - Wiggins, G. (1989). A true test: Toward more authentic and equitable assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70(9), 703–713.

² - Shepard, L. A. (1989). Why we need better assessments. *Educational Leadership*, 46(7), 4-9.

³ - Brown, R. (1989). Testing and thoughtfulness. *Educational Leadership*, 46(7), 31-33.

⁴ - King, M.B., Schroeder, J., & Chawszczewski, D. (2001). Authentic Assessment and Student Performance in Inclusive School

⁵ - Choate, J. & Evans, S. (2019). Authentic Assessment of Special Learners: Problem or Promise?, *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 37:1, 6-9, DOI: 10.1080/1045988X.1992.9944588

⁶ - Awit, T., Gracia, G., & Pingol, V.H. (2021). Authentic Assessment in Teaching Science among Secondary basic education Teachers in the New Normal

⁷ - Adams, S. (2019). *Authentic Assessment in the Online Classroom*. Wiley.Com

⁸ - Kearns, L. (2012). Students Assessment in Online Learning: Challenges and Effective Practices. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 8(2), 198-208.

Qualitative Analysis

This section presents the data gathered and analyzed from the interview conducted in the study. The researcher used thematic analysis to present the responses' patterns, codes, and themes.

i. Current assessment used in the new learning modality

The first theme, which is Current Assessment Preferably Used, depicts the participants' answers if they have retained or varied the assessment tools prior to the pandemic, their technique for retaining or varying, and their preferred assessment tools be used as new learning modalities emanated. As we thoroughly looked into the responses, the participants shared their



experiences both prior to the pandemic and the actuality of using Online Assessment tools such as Teacher-made tests, Feedback, Performance task, WH questions, and Oral tests.

“Yes, it has been revised, miss. Ours currently, miss, is that we've already stopped the first and second quarter tests. We focus on the child's daily activities, but in our case, we also include academic enrichment activities.”

Portfolio, Written tests, Order Sequencing & Events, and Unit tests are used in Offline Assessment.

“Same goes for the regular class. We often had spelling tests and multiple choice questions. I explain them occasionally, and there are also matching types. These tests are used in the regular class as well.”

These extracted responses of the participants depict special educators' strategies in retaining the mode of assessment and giving modifications that suit their assessment preference despite the emergency health and economic crisis that bring forth new learning modalities.

ii. Challenges encountered by special education teachers

Challenges encountered by the Special education teachers, the second theme, presents the participants' responses regarding their satisfaction with the result of all the Online and Offline assessments that they have undertaken, along with their encountered challenges in employing the assessment mentioned above tools. Subsequently, exploring the participants' responses leads to perceptible challenges. For instance, over-dependence on parents, student needs for continuous adult support, scarcity of learning resources, and students' need for more teachers' physical guidance are the special educators' challenges upon employing Online assessments.

“If I had to rate them on a scale of 1 to 10, I'd give them a 6. I don't want to say that I'll give them a 7, because it's quite different when you're dealing with children face-to-face because you can really explain everything to them as a teacher.”

Omission of summative assessments, constrained teaching in the new learning modality, limited learning engagement, the inefficiency of the assessments used, and restrained educational support are the different levels of satisfaction and challenges of special educators in employing Offline assessments.

“I know that when you say formative assessment, you're not referring to their learning. Neither based on their understanding of the issue, what did they learn about it because our lesson was modified before the pandemic. So if founded on my teaching, I know that their output is based on their comprehension and learning. I'm certain that it does not come from their understanding or knowledge gained from the modules because there's no explanation, or even discussion.”

As mentioned earlier, the participants' responses give an implication of their pursuit for an immediate educational remedy that breaks barriers to students with special needs' right to education.



iii. Recommended Assessments

The third theme, Assessment Recommendation, comprises the respondents' responses of sharing their experience during the pandemic, which entails expressing their recommendations that precede teaching management.

“I have fears because I know that there are some parents who don't know how to handle the behavior of their child. Why is it very hard because we also take into consideration the available devices or gadgets, it is very difficult to connect since there are some parents who has to work and has to leave their child” infer “We should go back to normal even for the month of January like Monday 5 students, Tuesday 5 student and so on and so forth.” Until then “I started home visit, I do house-to house and continue follow the protocols.”

These responses reflect Special Educators' aspirations and call for urgency in generating supplementary and diverse avenues in teaching students with special needs to utilize the new typical learning set-up.

Conclusion

The transcribed, coded, categorized, and thematically sorted responses from the conducted virtual interview generated essential themes. Such as fundamentals in the pursuit of acquiring the Special Education Teachers' Preference in an Online and Offline Assessment Tools along with categorizing the Authentic assessment and Performance-based assessment which the Special Education teachers preferably use.

Given the current health and economic crisis, Special Education teachers are not settling or compromising the least traditional means of teaching and learning. Indeed, an Alternative assessment is observed upon the participants' responses during the virtual interview. With this, the Informal Assessment, Performance Tasks, WH-Questions, and Order Sequencing Event that the Special Education teachers are using relate to more action-based tasks. These tasks are categorized as Performance-based assessments while associating the teaching and learning activities with a real-life scenario; Special Education teachers utilize Teacher-made tests, Standardized tests, Written Tests, Oral tests, Homework, and Unit tests.

The participants infer that despite the new learning modalities, assessments are possibly done by retaining the assessment tools used prior to the pandemic. However, specific modifications are to be observed in utilizing such Online and Offline assessment tools considering the Special Educators' preferred assessments, strategies, availability of resources, direct educational support, and ability to adapt to the present-day educational scheme.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Clustered Sub-Themes and Themes

Current Assessment Used in the New Normal Modalities		Challenges encountered by the Special Education Teachers		Assessment Recommendation
Online Assessment Tools	Offline Assessment Tools	Breach in the integration of Online Assessment	Interference on integration of Offline Assessment	Teaching Management
Informal Assessment	Standardized Test	Over-dependence on parents	Limited Learning Engagement	Educational Support and Materials
Teacher-made Test	Written Tests	Student needs for persistent adult support	Restrained Educational Support	Teaching-Learning Initiatives
Performance Task	Order Sequencing Event	Scarcity of Learning Resources		
WH-Questions Oral Test	Homework Unit Test	Absence of physical guidance		
Feedback				

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