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Assessment practices for students with learning disabilities in Lebanese private schools: A national survey

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Abstract: Education is intended to provide diverse students with the skills and competencies needed to enhance their lives. This includes assessment practices that enable teachers to identify students' current level of skills, their strength and weaknesses, target instruction at student's personal level, monitor student learning and progress and plan and conduct adjustments in instruction, and evaluate the extent to which students have met instructional goals. The aim of this study is to discover, describe, and compare the assessment practices of teachers and administrators working with students with learning disabilities in Lebanese private schools via the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) evaluation model. Responses were compared and contrasted between administrators and teachers regarding the ethical component of assessment practices, as well as teacher and administrators' training and preparation for student assessment, their involvement in it, the impact they perceive student assessment practices were producing, and their assessment practices for students with learning disabilities. The results revealed a Lebanese context marked by a critical gender imbalance with a very high female dominance and a significant inaccuracy in ethical standards. Input evaluation revealed that almost half of the teachers and administrators expressed being ill-prepared in assessing student performance as a result of their teacher education program, and that

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rasha ElSaheli-Elhage has been a special education teacher since 1996. Her interest in assessments started when she moved to the USA and began teaching in the public sector where state assessments were mandatory for many students with learning disabilities. She always felt puzzled by the reason why students whose IEP clearly stated they were below grade level in either math or reading or both were still assessed with grade-level material. This issue incited her research interest in transforming assessments into teaching tools to help improve students' learning and succeed in grade-level school and state assessments.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The discipline of special education in the Arab region is in urgent need of baseline data to improve its various aspects. This research study establishes a baseline for teachers and administrators' assessment practices for students with learning disabilities in Lebanese private schools. It presents information about teachers and administrators' gender, age, educational level, teaching assignments, years of experience, and geographical distribution. It also explores the extent to which teachers and administrators utilize traditional vs. alternative assessments, how ethical their practices are, how prepared they feel in the areas of assessment, and their perceived impact of assessment on the improvement of the educational process. Additionally, this study sheds light on the current practices of "assessment for learning", a much-needed approach in special education.

administrators are significantly more involved in student assessment than teachers. Process evaluation revealed that even though special education teachers thought that alternative assessments were important, some of their assessment practices were still imprinted with traditional methods. Product evaluation revealed that teachers and administrators' perceived impact of student assessment was positive on the various aspects of the school. Recommendations emanating from the CIPP evaluation were given and implications within the Middle East region are discussed.

Subjects: Educational Research; Inclusion and Special Educational Needs; Classroom Practice; Assessment & Testing; Teaching & Learning

Keywords: assessment; formative assessment; opportunity to learn; learning disability; inclusive assessment practices; CIPP evaluation

1. Background of the study

There is a need for the identification and implementation of assessment practices that can assist students with disabilities achieve learning objectives (Harris & James, 2006) and ensure the acquisition of the necessary skills to become independent, informed, and productive. Access to the general education curriculum greatly improves their knowledge of human society as well as their understanding of the world and how it works (Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkeley, & Graetz, 2010). Nevertheless, a major educational challenge remains in the gaps that students with learning disabilities[1] develop as they move into more challenging and abstract concepts, possibly falling behind regular education students and getting caught in a circle of frustration and academic deficits. Because assessment practices can be teaching tools, it is important to investigate classroom assessment practices that enable teachers to identify students' current level of skills, their strength and weaknesses, target instruction at student's personal level, monitor student learning and progress, plan and conduct adjustments in instruction, and evaluate the extent to which students have met instructional goals (Educational Testing Service, 2003; Frey & Schmitt, 2010).

Riggan and Oláh (2011) described assessment practices as "a mosaic of tools, routines, and practices" (p. 3), a metaphor that is diverse and pluralistic because assessments must be implemented across disciplines, types of institutions, and countries. At the macro-level, assessment practices are highly refined in highly developed countries. In Third-World countries where educational practices have yet to coalesce, assessment practices are in flux. There are countries that are in between these extremes, such as Lebanon. The question rightly arises what type of mosaic do the Lebanese special education assessment tiles form?

2. Special education in Lebanon

With the onset of the Lebanese War in the 1980s, the issue of disability began to immerse the collective national consciousness, mobilizing numerous non-governmental organizations (NGO). Care, education, and rehabilitation of children with disabilities constituted the *raison d'être* of a large number of specialized centers (Dirani, 1998). The civil war period compelled NGO to develop special education services to fill a major void in the public sector (McBride, Dirani, & Mukalid, 1999). Matters related to disabilities were left in their entirety to the Ministry of Social Affairs when it was central for the Ministry of Education to become the responsible party for the education of all children with disabilities, and hence the two ministries coordinated their offered services (McBride et al., 1999).

Lebanon's Public Law 220 (PL 220) in 2000 created a legislative framework for individuals with disabilities and addressed the right to equal educational and learning opportunities for all people with disabilities (Wehbi, 2006). According to Wehbi (2006), the absence of reliable demographic and economic data in general, and about people with disabilities more specifically, made it complicated to understand and study assessment needs of students with learning disabilities. Mansour and Ghawi (2007) claimed this was due to a lack of an agreed-upon definition and standard classification

system of disabilities. Few inclusive attempts were documented since 1982, none of which addressed assessment practices for children with special needs, let alone children with learning disabilities.

NGOs played a major role in the education of students with special needs and many of them refer them to private schools (ElZein, 2009) because the Ministry of Education did not have a strategy to implement the Law 220 that ensured access to education for students with disabilities (Civil Society Organization, [CSO], 2010). Currently, the main provider of educational services for students with special needs and in particular students with learning disabilities[2] is a handful of schools from the private sector (Four, Hajjar, Bibi, Chahab, & Zaazaa, 2006; Peters, 2009). They seek to develop the human and environmental capacity to mainstream students with special needs (WawLphu, 2007). These schools' policies, and more specifically classroom assessment practices, are internal administrative responsibilities and consequently are different in terms of their form, emphasis, and frequency of use across the country.

3. Special education in the Middle East

The Middle East is made of a mix of different cultures. Each country's educational past and current experiences are different, yet several important similarities exist (Akkari, 2004). The majority of the Middle Eastern educational systems are failing to deliver a learning process that results in securing the needed skills for the twenty-first-century labor market (Rubin, 2014). Today's society demands graduates who are critical, analytical, capable of taking initiatives, and being proactive in responding to the challenges and social needs of their communities. The current existing systems are mainly stuck in the spoon-feeding approach to learning (Rubin, 2014). Teachers in the region have been criticized for using outdated teaching strategies that concentrate primarily on test scores to evaluate students' learning (Bacchus, 2006; Benard, 2006), adopt a culture of elitism, fail to deliver differentiated instruction, and neglect the need for professionalization (Heyneman, 1997). The quality of basic education in the region is limited due to the lack of qualified teachers (Akkari, 2004). A large percentage of teachers enter the profession with deficient academic preparation and pre-service training and do not receive adequate and appropriate professional development during service (Faour, 2012). Thus, all countries within the Middle East share a major concern: "how to improve the quality of education" (United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2002, p. 54). These countries consider that an improvement in educational quality must go hand in hand with a drive to improve teachers and teaching practices (Chapman & Miric, 2009). It is understood that any improvement of teachers and teaching practices would entail a thorough look into their assessment practices. Education systems are deemed to be of higher quality when students demonstrate higher levels of learning through appropriate assessment practices (Chapman & Miric, 2009).

The examination of special education in the Middle East, in particular the assessment practices for students with learning disabilities, is hindered by the lack of literature and rapid and frequent changes in decision-making within ministries of education. Details on provisions for students with learning disabilities who are already in mainstream schools are difficult to gather. Information about the exact range of services and teachers' assessment practices and expertise available is heavily dependent upon word of mouth, not a central information provider (Gaad, 2010). With the exception of Lebanon, education is largely publically provided and financed within the Middle Eastern countries (Africa, 1998) and it appears that special education services in the public schools' systems of most Middle Eastern countries are gaining a foothold (Gaad, 2010). Furthermore, most Middle Eastern societies as well as the Gulf Corporation Council countries are currently seeking inclusion for learners with special needs in mainstream education in their different ways. Placed under considerable pressure from special needs activists and parent groups, most countries have shown initiatives in beginning to address the need for laws to back intentions of inclusive practices (Gaad, 2010). For the exception of Kuwait, where the system is based on segregating disabilities to be educated in isolation in designated schools under the Ministry of Education, countries such as Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Syria (prior to the 2011 and still ongoing conflict) are riding the inclusion wave and working on providing services for students with learning disabilities. However, even though the concept of inclusion has gained a relatively clear

understanding in many parts of the world, in practice, it can be questioned whether many participants and stakeholders in the Middle East have a clear definition and concept of what inclusion actually means, what it should entail, how it is to be applied, and how students ought to be assessed. Particularly, findings show that terminology used to refer to certain special needs and disabilities is often "confusing" in the region (Gaad, 2010) which explains the serious issues in connection to diagnosis of special needs in the Middle Eastern system. Nonetheless, the region shares a rather common cultural understanding of special needs and disabilities and is largely much based on supporting the "weak and the vulnerable" from a charity-based approach rather than supporting citizens with equal rights and benefits from a rights-based approach (Gaad, 2010). Schools themselves take no responsibility for the education of children with disabilities, preferring instead to be looked upon as doing a favor to the child (Iyanar, 2000), especially within private schools where special education services are arbitrary, dependent upon goodwill or business strategy options.

The lack of basic evidence-based information and data, coupled with the obscurity of what special education provisions are really all about within the Middle East, leaves the seeker bewildered by conflicting data. A reproduction of this research study, whether within the public schools' systems or private ones, seems to be necessary to gain a better understanding not only of the nature of the assessments practices applied by those countries, but also about the nature and effectiveness of their inclusive practices.

4. Traditional assessment

Traditionally, assessment has been viewed as an avenue for verifying student learning (Bintz, 1991) and it takes place after the learning:

> Traditionally, evaluation has been seen as an outside force that is imposed upon the curriculum generally and the learner specifically. It has been externally imposed because of several assumptions- that the questions which drive the curriculum must be supplied by outside recognized experts, that the vast majority of what is to be learned is already known, digested, and organized, and that there are acknowledged correct responses to the curricular questions which are to be asked. (Short & Burke, 1991, p. 60)

Berlak (1992) explained that traditional assessments held the assumption that knowledge had a single consensual meaning, especially that facts and values are distinct and separable entities that can be measured objectively. Berlak (1992) noted that traditional assessment was exclusively used to monitor students' learning. As a result, this model separated high-level from low-level learners, creating a system that classified and ranked students.

Anderson (1998) considered traditional assessment as a passive process where students memorized the knowledge given by the material or the teacher. Hence, the frequent use of the empty vessel metaphor to describe learners. The teacher's role was "to fill the students by making deposits of information which the instructor considers to constitute true knowledge" (Freire, 1990, p. 60). The focus was on learning content rather than on how to obtain information (Anderson, 1998).

Another focus of traditional assessment was essentially on the students' cognitive abilities. Their values and interests were considered disconnected from their ability and competences to complete the tasks at hand (Raven, 1992). Traditional assessments embraced a hierarchical model of power and control where the power to make curricular and assessment decisions was in the hands of the educator alone. Students had no part in decisions about what constituted important learning to them, nor were they offered a chance to determine how well they were learning (Heron, 1988; Sessions, 1995).

An overriding concern in research studies of teachers' traditional assessment practices is the limited and infrequent use of statistical data analysis (Gullickson, 1986; Marso & Pigge, 1988; Pigge & Marso, 1997). Lack of statistical knowledge and training, in addition to teachers' discomfort toward this discipline, may have led to a devaluating perspective on the use of statistical procedures (Mertler, 1998).

Bertrand (1994) noted that traditional assessments evaluated student's work based on tests, and their final scores were representative of their learning, disregarding the how and why of student learning, hence separating the process from the product (Anderson, 1998). Herman (1992) and Engel (1994) described traditional assessment as focusing on mastering discrete and isolated bits of information that represented lower level thinking skills. Connell, Johnston, and White (1992) added that students were considered cheating if they completed the assessment tasks with the assistance of others since traditional assessments perceived learning as an individual enterprise. Therefore, students worked competitively against one another.

A report issued by The National Commission on Testing and Public Policy (NCTPP) (1990) noted the necessity of transforming the testing movement to focus on the development of the human potential and on allocating greater opportunities to the learners from kindergarten through the workplace. Other sources such as Haney and Madaus (1989) and and Livingston and Borko (1989), were aligned in pointing out similar major problems with the ongoing testing practices at the time. Traditional testing provided a misleading information and insufficient view of student learning and failed to explain the approach that students adopted to respond in a particular way to test items (Choate & Evans, 1992). Many traditional tests were unfair toward minorities and students with disabilities, using biased language and culturally specific examples (Choate, Enright, Miller, Poteet, & Rakes, 1992), while "Students with disabilities ... should be provided opportunities to learn and demonstrate their mastery of material under circumstances that take into account their special needs" (National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992, p. 10). Researchers argued that traditional tests were being generally culturally biased and were more likely to favor white, middle-class, native English-speaking students (Gomez, Grau, & Block, 1991). The Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) revealed in 2006 teacher classroom assessment practices were an issue at the international level, and a limited range of classroom assessments are utilized in over 40 countries (Mullis, Martin, Robitaille, & Foy, 2008).

In the midst of the public's dissatisfaction with traditional assessment practices, and parents and educators wanting more than simple tests scores that are not necessarily representative of what students could actually do, teachers demanded radical change in assessment that could provide them with a base for instructional decisions (Poteet, 1993). Coutinho and Malouf (1993) noted that the increasing use of alternative performance assessment was expected to redirect curriculum and instruction toward current and more holistic theories of learning. As Wiggins (1989) described it: "if tests determine what teachers actually teach and what students will study for-and they do- then the road to reform is a straight but steep one: test those capacities and habits we think are essential, and test them in context" (p. 41). It was clear an array of new assessment strategies capable of addressing the different learning styles and backgrounds was needed (Halpern, 1994).

5. Assessment for learning and students with learning disabilities

Many students with learning disabilities (LD) encounter social and emotional difficulties (e.g. Bryan, 2005; Fisher, Allen, & Kose, 1996; Huntington & Bender, 1993; Rourke, 1991, 2005; Rourke & Tsatsanis, 1996; Siegel, 2003; Siegel & Himel, 1998; Siegel & Ryan, 1989; Silver, 1988; Stanovich, 1986; Stone & La Greca, 1990; ValÅs, 1999). They are often overwhelmed in learning situations (Salend, 2005), particularly in disciplines dependent on reading comprehension, an essential skill for survival in the academy (Gersten, Jordan, & Flojo, 2005; McNamara, 2007). Knowing that certain techniques and strategies can be used to increase achievement in reading and other basic skills, which techniques are most useful in certain learning situations and how to use these techniques as powerful tools are essential to enable students with learning disabilities to become strategic, effective, and lifelong learners (Elhoweris, Alsheikh, & Haq, 2011).

Assessment for learning, underpinned by the confidence that every student can improve (Assessment Reform Group, 1999), empowers underachieving students by providing opportunities to develop their learning and meta-cognition (Hendry, 2006). Described as a student-centered approach (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002), assessment for learning mediates "the development of intellectual abilities, construction of knowledge and formation of students' identities" (Shepard, 2000, p. 4). Assessment for learning makes it an essential element of special education classroom assessment practices, especially when the field of special education emphasizes the individual student and her/his educational needs (Shriner, 2000).

Harris and James (2006) noted that assessment will be most effective if students understand its purpose, what they are required to do, and the standards that are expected. There is compelling evidence that students' conceptions of educational assessments have a considerable impact on the quality of their educational experiences and learning (Entwistle, 1991; Marton & SÄLJÖ, 1976; Ramsden, 1997). Students who lack confidence to achieve tend to achieve less (Bandura, 1989; Pajares, 1996), especially students with learning disabilities who have recurrently experienced academic difficulties and failures. However, involving them in meaningful assessment practices where they have the opportunity to maximize their conception of assessment as a process that increases their personal accountability helps them improve their achievement (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008). These concerns were typically addressed by assessment for learning where sharing learning goals with students and helping them recognize the standards they are aiming for (Assessment Reform Group, 1999) are considered among its main characteristics.

Segers, Dochy, and Cascallar (2003) and Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens (2003) suggested students should be active participants in the assessment process in addition to be involved in the understanding of how the assessment process actually occurs. Students have a tendency to display a positive attitude toward assessment tasks and methods if they perceive it as fair and positively affecting their learning. Formative, active, and creative modes of assessment promote student's focus on the construction of knowledge and deep understanding, although traditional forms of assessments emphasized the focus on memorization and grades rather than learning itself (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005).

A lingering barrier to students with special needs with their non-disabled peers is the way these children are being assessed (Lebeer, Candeias, & Grácio, 2011). The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education recommended the development of systems for ongoing formative assessment in mainstream schools by giving schools and classroom teachers tools capable of assessing all students, including those with special needs (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2003).

6. Ethics in classroom assessment practices

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (2006) on teacher classroom assessment practices indicated a limited range of classroom assessment practices in over 40 countries (Mullis et al., 2008). Inevitable issues were raised related to assessments' ethical concerns as practices evolved (Pope, Green, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2009). Classroom assessment practices were likely to occur repeatedly, and the consequences of the errors and abuses were cumulative. Airasian (2005) proposed that the assessment ethical standards should indicate "some aspect of a teacher's fairness in dealing with his or her pupils" (p. 20). Similarly, Taylor and Nolen (2005) discussed poor assessment and its significant impact on students and noted that "the ethical responsibility of educators is first, Do No Harm" (p. 7). Originally, a principal of medical ethics, Do No Harm in the context of education requires that "teachers act in such a way as to avoid causing harm to students as well as other individuals" (Pope et al., 2009, p. 779).

When the assessment or test score is not representative of actual academic achievement, it might be adversely impacted by extraneous factors (Haladyna, Nolan, & Haas, 1991; Popham, 1991). Teachers who practice test items shift from content mastery to students' ability to memorize and recall. Green, Ellis, Frémont, and Batty (1998) applied this principle to other elements of classroom

assessments, emphasizing that grades should only reflect the mastery degree of the anticipated instructional outcomes. Many classroom teachers modify students' grades due to presence or lack of effort, behavior problems, late work, and extra credit. This overstates or understates the learner's true level of knowledge or understanding mastery. When used in decision-making, a serious ethical concern arises because it will no longer be possible to "ensure that a student evaluation will produce sound information about a student's learning and performance which leads to valid interpretations, justifiable conclusions, and appropriate follow-up" (Gullickson, 2003).

7. Purpose of the study and methodology

The aim of this study was to determine and explicate assessment practices for students with learning disabilities, in addition to administrators' and teachers' perceptions of those practices in special education in Lebanon via the CIPP (context, input, process, and product) evaluation model (Stufflebeam, 1971). The CIPP research questions were as follow:

Context evaluation: In what kind of educational setting do assessment practices take place?

Context evaluation assessed organizational parameters related to assessment practices of selected schools in addition to the environment where assessments took place. Hence, context evaluation included schools' mission components of student assessment, their content and methods for student assessment, their assessment policies, their ethical practices, and their attitudes toward student assessment.

Input evaluation: How prepared and involved are teachers and administrators in student assessment?

Input evaluation involved an examination of the teachers and administrators' background and training in assessment. Data about teachers and administrators' level of preparation and in-services in addition to their involvement in student assessment were collected.

Process evaluation: How are assessments applied in the classroom?

Process evaluation related to the implementation of assessments (i.e. traditional assessment vs. alternative assessment). It also looked at the teachers' practices of assessment for learning in its two components, monitoring and scaffolding.

Product evaluation: What impact do assessment practices have?

Product evaluation looked at the impact of student assessment practices. Participants reported about changes in (1) students' achievement, (2) instructional or teaching methods, and (3) student assessment plans, policies, and processes. Product evaluation also looked into the impact of assessment practices on resource allocation and the hiring of specialists.

7.1. Methodology

The sample consisted of 57 private schools in Lebanon that offered a special education program for students with learning disabilities. A teacher and an administrator surveys were developed containing five subscales: (1) Traditional and Alternative Assessments and Assessment for Learning, (2) Ethical Assessment Practices, (3) Preparation and Training, (4) Involvement in Student Assessment, and (5) Perceived Impact of Assessments.

The teacher's survey was developed by selecting questions from three different surveys:

(1) Teachers' Assessment for Learning Questionnaire, TAFL-Q, developed by Pat-El, Tillema, Segers, and Vedder (2013); TAFL-Q was constructed for the purpose of evaluating perceptions regarding assessment for learning practices;

(2) Ohio Teacher Assessment Practices Survey, developed by Mertler (1998); the purpose of this survey is to gather information regarding the practices of teachers with respect to classroom assessments; and

(3) Ethical Assessment Practices: Developed by Johnson, Green, Kim, and Pope (2008), this 36-item web-based survey was designed with specific scenarios that depict practices in classroom assessment.

The administrators' survey was developed using excerpts from the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Program on Institutional Support for Student Assessment (2000), whose primary purpose is to examine how the institution supports student assessment.

Both surveys' internal consistency and reliability were obtained via Cronbach's alpha (Tables 1 and 2). A process of projecting Cronbach's alpha if the item is deleted was used to determine if an item should be dropped from the scale to improve the overall scale reliability. None of the items on the teacher's survey appeared to be candidates for deletion because the increase would have been minimal (between 0 and .08). Two items were deleted from the administrator's survey to increase Cronbach alpha's coefficient. Additionally, a statistical analysis to compare and contrast between teachers' responses, administrators' responses, and teachers and administrators' responses regarding the different survey subscales was performed using *t*-tests and ANOVAs. The analysis helped determine if there were statistically significantly different responses to the survey questions, with nominal alpha set to .05.

8. Limitations

The absence of a clear vision, strategy, and policies for the whole education sector in general (Karam, 2006), and for the special education sector in particular, and the absence of organizations collecting reliable information useful for national or international extrapolation hinder systematic efforts to theorize and refine concepts able to address, in a contextualized and comprehensive fashion, processes of educational change (Mazawi, 1999) and the creation of a special education national assessment protocol. Furthermore, there is a lack of coordination between various private schools, which will make generalizing assessment practices difficult. Similarly, there is limited coordination between the ministry of education and higher education and private schools (Karam, 2006), potentially resulting in the absence of accountability for the schools' assessment practices.

9. Results

The psychometrics of the survey are compiled in Tables 1 and 2. Cronbach's alpha, a measure of internal consistency and reliability, was .85 and .91 for the teacher's and administrator's survey, respectively. Based on a rough estimate from the Syndicate of Special Education in Lebanon, there are an estimated 575 special education teachers and 114 associated administrators. Therefore, a 95% confidence interval with a margin of error of ±5% requires a sample of 231 and 89 teachers and administrators, respectively.

Table 1. Total and subscale reliability of the teacher's survey

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	# of items	Spearman–Brown (51)
Teacher's survey—Traditional and alternative assessments, AFL	.85	51	–
Teacher's survey—Ethical assessment practices	.28	6	.77
Teacher's survey—Preparation and training	.37	3	.91
Teacher's survey—Involvement in student assessment	.86	4	.99
Teacher's survey—Impact	.83	5	.98

Note: The Spearman–Brown projects subscale reliabilities for full scale length of 51 items.

Table 2. Total and subscale reliability of the administrator's survey

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	# of items	Spearman–Brown (32)
Administrator's survey—Content, methods, mission, policies, and attitudes	.91	32	–
Administrator's survey—Ethical assessment practices	.14	6	.47
Administrator's survey—Preparation and training	.19	2	.79
Administrator's survey—Involvement in student assessment	.86	4	.95
Administrator's survey—Impact	.69	4	.95

Note: The Spearman–Brown projects subscale reliabilities for full scale length of 51 items.

9.1. Context evaluation—In what kind of educational setting do assessment practices take place?

9.1.1. Participants' gender

Female teachers' count was 652 (96%) vs. 27 (4%) male teachers. Female administrators' count was 76 (85%) vs. 13 (15%) male administrators. See Dee (2006) for potential issues in assessment that may arise due to a gender imbalance.

9.1.2. Participants' age

The teachers' age mean was 32 years old and the administrators' age mean was 40.

9.1.3. Participants by districts

Fifty-seven schools participated:19 (33%) located in Beirut, with 217 (32%) teachers, 38 (43%) administrators; 13 (23%) in Mount Lebanon with 143 (21%) teachers, 20 (23%) administrators; 5 (9%) in the Beqaa with 48 (7%) teachers, 3 (4%) administrators; 10 (17.5%) in North Lebanon with 149 (22%) teachers, 14 (15%) administrators); and 10 (17.5%) in South Lebanon with 122 (18%) teachers, 14 (15%) administrators.

Beirut, the capital with 2+ million residents, had the highest percentage of participating schools. The Beqaa, populated by half million, had the smallest percentage. The most recent directory of inclusive schools in Lebanon, from May 2014, indicated there were only eight private schools in the Beqaa with special education services for students with learning disabilities.

9.1.4. Participants' educational level

Six (1%) teachers and 7 (8%) administrators held an EdD or PhD; 13 (19%) teachers and 33 (37%) administrators held a Master's degree. The teaching diploma, obtained after the bachelor's degree, was held by 129 (19%) teachers and 12 (13%) administrators. Three hundred and nineteen (47%) teachers and 31 (35%) administrators held a bachelors' degree, which need not be in the field of education. However, 88 (13%) teachers and 6 (7%) administrators only had a high school diploma or an equivalent degree. This is a potential policy concern because of the relationship between teacher credentials and student learning outcomes (e.g. Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007, 2010).

Only few private-accredited universities in Lebanon offer special education majors and teaching diplomas. Therefore, recruiting difficulties have forced many school officials to hire uncertified teachers. Conversely, Master's degrees generally have not been found to predict higher student achievement or alter assessment practices (Ladd, 2008), mathematics education being an exception.

9.1.5. Teachers' teaching level

The majority of teachers, 414 (61%) of them, were at the elementary level, consistent with the educational trajectory of students with learning disabilities in Lebanese private schools. Most schools provide special education services at the elementary level, but these services start to decline as students move to middle and high schools due to increased academic demands of LD students and the lack of what may be considered burdening resource requirements for the school. Subsequently, achievement gaps gradually increase and these students have an increased tendency to drop out or turn to vocational programs.

9.1.6. Years of teaching and administrative experience

Teachers have on average nine years of experience; administrators have a mean of 14 years of teaching experience and 8 years of administrative experience. Teachers and administrators often state that experience is what makes the best teacher (Goodlad, 1984), although "everything depends upon the quality of the experience" (Dewey, 1963, p. 27). Increased teacher/administrator effectiveness in assessment practices over the years of teaching occurs while they create meaning from experiences. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether the participants' years of teaching or administrative experience are a positive indicator of successful assessment practices using a single numerical value.

9.1.7. Content, methods, mission, policies, and attitudes

Regarding the content of student assessment, 78 (90%) administrators reported a strong to very strong emphasis placed by their school on basic skills, 77 (89%) on cognitive development, 72 (83%) on affective development, 52 (60%) on social development, and 71 (82%) on student satisfaction and involvement with the school. Thirty-five (40%) administrators reported moderate emphasis on vocational or professional skills or competences. This moderate score might be an indicator that students with learning disabilities must rely on only having a single educational path.

Concerning methods of assessment, 70 (81%) administrators reported a strong to very strong emphasis on school-developed instruments and tests and 67 (77%) on student performance methods. Thirty-one (37%) reported moderate emphasis on the use of commercial instruments or tests due to their expense, lack of content validity corresponding to the Lebanese curriculum, or simply distrust because they are imported from foreign countries.

The five items of the school's mission component subscale were mostly rated as being highly to very highly emphasize by administrators, with responses ranging from 56 to 96% agreement. Similarly, the eight items of the assessment and policies subscale were mostly rated as important to very important by administrators, responses ranging from 70 to 92% agreement.

Nine out of the 10 items of the Attitudes toward Assessment subscale given to administrators were mostly agree to highly agree responses, ranging from 65 (73%) to 85 (95%) in agreement. Interestingly, almost half of the administrators were neutral or did not agree about teachers being free to implement their own assessment approaches at their school. This might be considered an important indicator when discussing power delegation regarding student assessments and teachers' contribution in the decision-making process related to assessment approaches. Delandshere (1996), for example, opined "if the purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning, assessment needs to promote the active participation of teachers in their evolving interpretation of the standards and of their own practice" (p. 115). Administrators' comparisons according to their educational level, position, and district did not reveal any statistically significant differences.

9.1.8. Ethical assessment practices

Eighty-eight (99%) administrators indicated it was ethically required to inform students about grading procedures, 637 (93%) teachers and 84 (94%) administrators found it unethical to give students a failing grade for the course due to missing the final exam, and 536 (79%) teachers and 63 (71%) administrators found it ethical to count class participation as much as 30% of the final grade.

However, 431 (64%) teachers and 54 (61%) administrators found it ethical to bump a student's participation grade up a few points to compensate for a bad quiz score due to problems at home, a clear violation of accuracy standards. Similarly, 598 (89%) teachers and 76 (85%) administrators found it ethical to consider student effort when determining grades, and 155 (23%) teachers (almost one fourth) found it ethical to lower report card grades for disruptive behavior. These "score polluting" practices overstate or understate the learner's level of knowledge and understanding.

Teachers' comparisons according to their teaching assignment,[3] educational level, and teaching level did not reveal any statistically significant differences. However, there was a statistically significant difference when teachers were compared according to the district ($F = 2.585$, $p = .036$). Teachers in Beirut were more likely to correctly rate "counting participation as 30% of the final grade" as an ethical practice compared with teachers in northern schools. They were more likely to view "bumping a student participation grade for problems at home" as an unethical practice compared with teachers in southern schools. Teachers in northern schools were more likely to view "considering student effort when determining grades" as an unethical practice than teachers in southern schools. And teachers in Beirut and southern schools were more likely to view "lowering report card grades for disruptive behavior" as an unethical practice than teachers in the Beqaa.

Administrators' comparisons according to their educational level, position, and district did not reveal any statistically significant differences in their ethical assessment practices. Teachers and administrators' comparisons according to the district, educational level, and gender also did not reveal any statistically significant differences.

9.2. Input evaluation—How prepared and involved are teachers and administrators in student assessment?

9.2.1. Preparation and training

Two hundred and ninety-three (45%) teachers and 41 (46%) administrators did not feel well prepared in terms of assessing student performance in their teacher education program. This high percentage could be attributed to the considerable number of teachers and administrators who did not attend teacher education programs, which explains their lack of exposure and studies of student assessment tools and approaches, and the limited student assessment courses taught in Lebanese universities. However, 463 (68%) teachers and 63 (71%) administrators reported attending in-service training sessions/workshops where the assessment of student performance was the main topic within the last three years, and 421 (62%) teachers and 66 (74%) administrators reported their current level of preparation in terms of assessing student performance as well prepared. There has been no substantiation, however, that skills obtained via in-service are comparable in depth or breadth to formal university coursework.

Teachers' comparisons according to their teaching assignment, educational level, and teaching level did not reveal statistically significant differences in their preparation and training. However, a statistically significant difference was noted according to the district ($F = 3.273$, $p = .011$). It appeared that teachers in the Beqaa attended statistically significantly more trainings about student assessment than did their colleagues in Mount Lebanon and the north. Teachers in southern schools were less prepared in student assessment as a result of their teacher education program than teachers in the other four districts.

Administrators' comparisons according to their educational level, position, and district did not reveal any statistically significant differences in their preparation and training. Teachers and administrators' comparisons according to the district, educational level, and gender did not reveal any significant differences either.

9.2.2. Involvement in student assessment

Four hundred and ninety-one (72%) teachers and 72 (81%) administrators reported being involved to very highly involved in creating new assessment techniques, and 484 (74%) teachers and 72 (81%) administrators reported being involved to very highly involved in participating in program reviews, curricular evaluations, or planning activities using assessment results; 279 (40%) teachers and 28 (32%) administrators reported lack to moderate involvement in serving on school-wide committees on student assessment, and 350 (54%) teachers and 25 (28%) administrators reported lack to moderate involvement in setting assessment policies for the school. As is generally the case, this indicates teachers were more likely to be involved in assessment tasks directly related to subject-related learning outcomes than institutional-level setting of assessment policies, as opposed to administrators who were more involved to highly involved in the various assessment aspects of the school.

Teachers' comparisons did not reveal statistically significant differences according to their teaching assignments and teaching level. However, significant differences were reported when compared according to their educational level ($p = .037$) and district ($F = 3.273$, $p = .011$). It appeared that teachers holding an EdD/PhD were significantly more involved in student assessment than those holding a teaching diploma, and teachers in the Beqaa were significantly more likely to serve on school-wide committees on student assessment and set assessment policies than teachers in Mount Lebanon.

Administrators' comparisons did not reveal statistically significant differences in their involvement in student assessment according to their educational level or district. However, a significant difference was recorded when compared according to their position ($p = .004$). School principals and department heads are more involved in student assessment than those holding other administrative positions.

Teachers and administrators' comparisons according to the district and gender revealed statistically significant differences at the group level. Administrators were more involved in student assessment than teachers ($F = 14.796$, $p = .00$).

9.3. Process evaluation—How are assessments applied in the classroom?

9.3.1. Traditional and alternative assessment practices

When teachers were compared according to their teaching assignment, there was a statistically significant difference between special education and regular education teachers in their use of traditional and alternative assessment practices ($t = 2.007$, $df = 670$, $p = .045$).

In terms of traditional assessments, special education teachers resorted to the following practices significantly more frequently than regular education teachers: (1) using paper-and-pencil tests provided with the curriculum material rather than creating their own, (2) true/false items, (3) multiple-choice items, and (4) fill in the blank items. Special education teachers indicated multiple-choice items were more important as assessment items than their regular education colleagues.

Nevertheless, special education teachers showed significantly less usage of essays as an assessment tool, reported higher frequency in using portfolio assessments, and indicated alternative assessments, creating own performance and portfolio assessments, and using portfolios in their classroom were more important than did their general education colleagues.

Special education teachers expressed their view about the importance of alternative assessments which was statistically significantly higher than the regular education teachers; yet, they maintained higher frequencies of some traditional assessment practices. This might be attributed to the difficulty in maintaining traditional assessment practices in the classroom due to the shortage of time (Cheung, 2002; Dori, 2003; Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt, 2002; Mabry, Poole, Redmond, & Schultz, 2003; Morgan & Watson, 2002; Tierney, 2006; Torrance & Pryor, 2001).

When teachers were compared according to their educational level in their traditional and alternative assessment practices, there was no statistically significant difference reported, nor when they were compared according to their teaching level. However, a statistically significant difference was recorded when compared according to the district ($F = 7.109$, $p = .00$). Southern teachers were the least to use traditional assessments and alternative assessments compared with teachers in other districts. Northern teachers reported the most use of traditional assessments while Beqaai teachers reported the most use of alternative assessments. Considering the Beqaa is a financially stressed area, focus on alternative assessment practices is an interesting outcome, possibly an impact of various national and international educational NGO teacher training activities.

9.3.2. Assessment for learning

Teachers reported high agreement with monitoring and scaffolding assessment for learning practices ranging from 530 (78%) to 672 (99%) agreement on the 12 items of the Assessment for Learning subscale. When compared according to their teaching assignment, there was a statistically significant difference between special education and regular education teachers ($t = 2.422$, $df = 665$, $p = .033$) in a monitoring practice where special education teachers reported to more frequently discuss the answers given after a test with each student, and a scaffolding practice where special education teachers reported to more frequently give their students the opportunities to ask questions. Giving feedback to students and providing them with opportunities to express their understanding and question their learning are practices that improve the quality of formative assessment (Black & William, 1998b), which is a notable positive aspect for Lebanese special education teachers. Additional comparisons revealed no statistically significant differences between teachers according to their educational level, to the district, or to their teaching level.

9.3.3. Assessments for students with learning disabilities

Teachers' answers reflected the type of accommodations they reported using in the classroom when assessing students with learning disabilities. Unless assigned teaching hours, administrators' answers reflected the type of accommodations they perceived being used by various teachers assessing students with learning disabilities or have instructed staff to implement. Table 3 reports results obtained regarding teachers and administrators' inclusion practices in relation to assessments. Table 4 reports the frequencies of "presentation" accommodations, Table 5 reports the frequencies of "responses" accommodations, and Table 6 reports the frequencies of "setting and timing" accommodations.

Table 3. Teachers and administrators' inclusion practices in relation to assessments

Inclusion practices of assessments	Teachers	Administrators
Students with learning disabilities complete the subject assessments with their peers, in the general education classroom	385 (57%) reported no	51 (57%) reported no
Students with learning disabilities are pulled out from the general education classroom to complete assessments in **Language Arts**	149 (22%) reported "all the time"	20 (23%) reported "all the time"
Students with learning disabilities are pulled out from the general education classroom to complete assessments in **Arabic Language**	147 (21%) reported "all the time"	22 (25%) reported "all the time"
Students with learning disabilities are pulled out from the general education classroom to complete assessments in **Math**	144 (21%) reported "all the time"	25 (28%) reported "all the time"
Students with learning disabilities are pulled out from the general education classroom to complete assessments in **Science**	98 (15%) reported "all the time"	13 (15%) reported "all the time"
Students with learning disabilities are pulled out from the general education classroom to complete assessments in **Social Studies**	63 (10%) reported "all the time"	10 (11%) reported "all the time"

Table 4. Presentation accommodations

Presentation accommodations	Teachers	Administrators
Presenting instructions orally	496 (73%) reported yes	77 (87%) reported yes
Providing special test preparation	437 (64%) reported yes	72 (81%) reported yes
Providing material in large print	475 (70%) reported yes	82 (92%) reported yes
Reducing the number of items per page or line	482 (71%) reported yes	71 (80%) reported yes
Providing on-task/focusing prompts	369 (54%) reported yes	65 (73%) reported yes
Providing a designated reader	337 (50%) reported yes	58 (65%) reported yes
Allowing subtests to be taken in a different order	332 (49%) reported yes	57 (64%) reported yes

Table 5. Responses accommodations

Responses accommodations	Teachers	Administrators
Permitting responses to be taken via computer	122 (18%) reported yes	33 (37%) reported yes
Allowing verbal responses	353 (52%) reported yes	69 (78%) reported yes
Allowing the use of spelling- and grammar-assistive devices	140 (21%) reported yes	30 (34%) reported yes
Allowing responses to be dictated to a scribe	160 (24%) reported yes	37 (42%) reported yes
Allowing the use of calculators	258 (38%) reported yes	56 (63%) reported yes
Allowing the use of a tape recorder to capture responses	69 (10%) reported yes	25 (17%) reported yes

Table 6. Setting and timing accommodations

Setting and timing accommodations	Teachers	Administrators
Administering tests in small group settings	351 (52%) reported yes	59 (66%) reported yes
Administering tests in a private room or alternate test site	362 (53%) reported yes	65 (73%) reported yes
Providing preferential seating	266 (39%) reported yes	49 (55%) reported yes
Providing special lighting	139 (21%) reported yes	25 (28%) reported yes
Providing a space with minimal distractions	421 (62%) reported yes	74 (83%) reported yes
Allowing frequent breaks	286 (42%) reported yes	60 (67%) reported yes
Administering tests in several timed sessions or over several days	264 (39%) reported yes	58 (65%) reported yes
Allowing extended time	534 (79%) reported yes	84 (94%) reported yes

Teachers' comparisons according to their educational level, teaching level, and teaching assignment did not indicate any statistically significant differences. Interestingly, the lack of difference between special education and regular education teachers in their assessments for students with learning disabilities might be attributed to the wave of inclusive education that has been submerging the country's special education initiatives in the last 15 years (e.g. the National Inclusion Project). Special education and regular education teachers are then considered as one professional entity with similar skills in assessments for both learning-disabled and non-disabled students. Even though the high percentages of assessment pull outs in core subjects might contradict these inclusive efforts, it appeared that a high percentage of special education and regular education teachers were mostly employing accommodations related to the presentation of the assessment material. Accommodations related to timing, setting, and responses ought to be used more frequently. Teachers in northern schools used statistically significantly less accommodations than their colleagues in southern schools ($F = 3.233$, $p = .012$). There were no statistically significant differences for administrators based on their educational level, position, and district.

Teachers and administrators' comparisons did not reveal statistically significant differences based on educational level and gender; main effects for the group and district were statistically significant ($F = 2.451$, $p = .045$). Administrators reported more use of accommodations than did teachers. This result could be an alarming sign for an important gap between the assessment practices that administrators think are taking place at their school and what teachers report they are actually doing. Teachers and administrators in northern schools used less accommodations than their colleagues in Beirut, Mount Lebanon, and southern schools; teachers and administrators in the Beqaa used less accommodations than their counterparts in southern schools.

9.4. Product evaluation—What impact do assessment practices have?

9.4.1. Impact

Four hundred and nineteen (62%) teachers reported that student assessment had a positive impact on changes in the instructional methods used, 453 (67%) teachers and 56 (63%) administrators reported that student assessment had a positive impact on students' achievements, 572 (84%) teachers and 85 (96%) administrators reported that student assessment had a positive to very positive impact on students' assessment plans, policies, or processes, and 520 (77%) teachers and 78 (88%) administrators reported that student assessment had a positive to very positive impact on resources allocations. Five hundred and forty-one (80%) teachers and 71 (80%) administrators reported positive to very positive impact of student assessment in hiring specialists.

Teachers' comparisons indicated a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceived impact that student assessment has when compared according to their teaching assignment ($t = 3.409$, $df = 626$, $p = .001$). There was a significant difference between special education and regular education teachers regarding hiring specialists. Special educators saw a more positive impact for hiring specialists on student assessment. This is possibly due to the nature of collaboration that special education teachers perform being part of a larger multidisciplinary team than their regular education colleagues. Collaborations might include physical therapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and outside testing agencies. In many instances, special educators are made part of the interviewing process when hiring new specialists which makes them more involved and aware of hiring activities at the school.

Teachers and administrators' comparisons according to their educational level, district, and teaching level did not reveal any statistically significant differences in their perceived impact of student assessment according to their educational level, position, or district. However, there was a statistically significant difference according to gender ($F = 5.619$, $p = .018$) where a statistically significant main effect for the group was recorded. Administrators' responses reflected a significantly more positive perceived impact of student assessment than teachers.

10. Summary and conclusion

The general Lebanese context in which students with learning disabilities are assessed is marked by a critical gender imbalance with a very high female dominance. An important disparity in schools' distribution exists within the five districts, with the highest concentration of schools in Beirut, the capital, and the lowest in the Beqaa Valley. The majority of teachers and administrators hold bachelor degrees, in addition to a number with only high school degrees most likely hired due to recruiting difficulties. The vast majority of special education services exist at the elementary level, with a steady decline of their availability once students reach middle and high schools. Administrators in Lebanese private schools report that the content of their schools' assessments bares a strong emphasis on basic skills, cognitive, affective, and social development, and student satisfaction and involvement at the school versus a moderate emphasis on vocational skills. They report that their schools' missions and policies are aligned with assessments' best practices and record positive attitudes toward students' assessment. However, there is a noticeable lack of freedom for teachers to implement their own assessment approaches, raising questions about the extent of teachers' involvement in the schools' decision-making process. In terms of ethical assessment practices,

teachers and administrators seem to be in a significant violation of the accuracy standard, overstating or understating the learner's true level of knowledge and understanding, with significant variations of practices among the districts.

Input evaluation revealed that almost half of the teachers and administrators in Lebanese private schools feel ill-prepared in assessing student performance as a result of their teacher education program. But since a considerable number report attending in-service trainings related to student assessment, especially teachers located in the Beqaa valley, their feelings improve to report being "well prepared" in assessing student performance. Regarding their involvement in student assessment, administrators are significantly more involved in student assessment than teachers. Teachers report being more involved in tangible assessment tasks directly related to the student, with significant differences when compared according to their educational level and according to the district. Administrators report being more involved in the various assessment aspects of the institution, with significantly more involvement of principals and department heads. Higher educational level seems to also play a role. Teachers and administrators holding an EdD/PhD seem to register a higher involvement in student assessment.

Process evaluation revealed that even though special education teachers in Lebanese private schools thought that alternative assessments were important, some of their assessment practices are still imprinted with traditional methods. Significant differences among districts reveal the most use of alternative assessment practices by teachers in the Beqaa valley, and the least use of those practices by teachers in the south of Lebanon. Northern teachers report the most use of traditional assessment practices. Furthermore, Lebanese teachers seem to be on board with Assessment for Learning practices with a significant difference between special education and general education teachers in a monitoring and a scaffolding practice. Regarding the assessment for students with learning disabilities, almost half of the teachers and administrators report pull out practices during assessments in English or French Language Arts, Arabic, and Math. Accommodations used are mostly related to the presentation of the assessment material, with less frequent uses of timing, setting, and responses accommodations. Teachers and administrators in northern schools appear to use significantly less accommodations than their colleagues in the other districts. Moreover, administrators report much more use of accommodations than teachers do, implicating an important gap between what administrators think is taking place and what teachers report they are actually doing.

Product evaluation revealed that teachers and administrators' perceived impact of student assessment is positive on the various aspects of the school. Special educators perceive a more positive impact on hiring specialists than regular educators do. Comparisons between teachers and administrators reveal a significant difference according to the group. Administrators report a more positive perception of the impact that student assessment has at their school than teachers.

This study represents the first stepping stone in building a comprehensive picture for assessment practices for students with learning disabilities in Lebanese private schools, in a country lacking a clear vision for the whole educational sector in general (Karam, 2006), and for the special education section in particular. Overwhelmed with the absence of organizations collecting reliable assessment information useful for national or international research, this study comes to give a general national overview of current assessment practices for students with learning disabilities.

Believing in the concept that good assessments promote learning and motivate both teachers and students, whereas poor assessments narrow the curriculum, de-skill, and demotivate teachers and frustrate students, there is an imminent need to further investigate classroom assessment practices and relate their pedagogical implications to policy-makers and interested parties. The development of sound pedagogical assessment practices is a never-ending process that involves ongoing review and refinement (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002). Further classroom observations are needed to compare and contrast with survey responses and obtain a wider range of evidence related to classroom assessment practices for student with learning disabilities in Lebanese private schools.

Implications in relation to other Middle Eastern countries point at the necessity of completing similar research studies, whether within the public school entities or private ones. It seems that whereas most Middle Eastern countries are on the quest for including students with learning disabilities in mainstream classes, they are all working in relative isolation (Gaad, 2010). More dialog is needed to highlight the issue of assessment practices for students with learning disabilities. Within these systems, looking at students' disabilities rather than their abilities appears to be the norm. Therefore, it is important to ensure that conferences on best assessment practices are regionally open and available to all teachers and other management, as well as paraprofessionals, for collaboration to become more common place and for links to be forged across nations as well as schools. Breaking across cultural barriers and opening up debate and discussion about good assessment practices will also avoid the difficulties experienced by all stakeholders involved who believe in the "rights- based" attitudes toward servicing students with special needs.

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Notes

1. Operational definition for learning disability: specific learning disability refers to heterogeneous clusters of disorders that significantly impede the normal progress of academic achievement. The lack of progress is exhibited in school performance that remains below expectation for chronological and mental ages, even when provided with high-quality instruction. The primary manifestation of the failure to progress is significant underachievement in a basic skill area (i.e. reading, math, and/or writing) that is not associated with insufficient educational, interpersonal, cultural/familial, and/or sociolinguistic experiences. The primary severe ability achievement discrepancy is coincident with deficits in linguistic competence (receptive and/or expressive), cognitive functioning (e.g. problem-solving, thinking abilities, and/or maturation), neuropsychological processes (e.g. perception, attention, and/or memory), or any combination of such contributing deficits that are presumed to originate from central nervous system dysfunction. The specific learning disability is a discrete condition differentiated from generalized learning failure by average or above (>90) cognitive ability and a learning skill profile exhibiting significant scatter indicating areas of strength and weakness (Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009).
2. Students labeled as learning disabled in Lebanese schools are usually those whose parents sought out a psychologist's advise and obtained a report stating the child's condition.
3. Teaching assignment refers to whether they teach special education or regular education.

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