

The Importance of Culturally Safe Assessment Tools for Inuit Students

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There are still no major assessment and diagnostic tools that educators can use to properly assess our Inuit students' learning. Cultural safety as it is currently defined in New Zealand educational research (Macfarlane et al., 2007) is necessary in creating a classroom community that encourages the appreciation of culture and worldview, and ultimately enables success as defined by the culture and community of the students. Modern day assessment tools used with Inuit students must also conform to this standard of cultural safety in order to ensure the equity and authenticity of the assessment results. There is a need for ongoing research and development of culturally safe assessment tools. To date, recommendations that include collaboration with local populations, evaluation of the tools presently being used, and the due diligence of ensuring these tools are culturally unbiased are a few guidelines that have the potential of creating culturally safe assessments that portray students' true learning abilities and assist both teacher and community in the support of their students' learning and success.

■ **Keywords:** education, inuit, cultural safety, assessment

In the context of the recent Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) and the document, *First Canadians, Canadians First* published by the National Committee on Inuit Education (2011), it is crucial to highlight the importance of cultural safety in the classroom. According to researcher Jessica Ball, 'Screening and assessment tools currently in use in Canada have been developed and normed in research involving predominantly children of European-heritage in urban settings with English or French as their first language' (Ball, 2007). Due to the culture-bound nature of available assessments, my concern and the concern of many educators who are teaching in Inuit communities is to determine the suitability of these assessments for use with our students. Even nonverbal assessments like the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (which this paper will focus on as an example) include many culturally bound items, which have the potential to lead to an improper diagnosis. What steps can be taken to have assessments reflect Inuit culture and knowledge? How can we as educators, schools and administrators begin to ensure that assessment tools provide us with accurate insight into a child's learning abilities? This paper will begin to discuss what needs to be done in order to promote culturally safe assessment tools that accurately portray our students' learning.

Since 2012, I have been working as a Special Education teacher in Nunavik, Quebec. The territory is home to 14 Inuit communities with populations that vary from over 2000 people to just over 100. I work in a village of over 1000 Inuit and Cree people. My school has approximately 150 students, kindergarten to senior year (known as Secondary five in our school board). On average, I work with over two-dozen students and their classroom teachers during the year, providing emotional and academic support. The Inuit culture in Nunavik is vibrant and the people are resilient, but many of the children are struggling to complete their education and to succeed within the school community. The problems in education according to teachers, community members and administrators vary. From issues with teacher retention to the academic and achievement gaps between Inuit and non-Inuit students, educators in Nunavik strive to provide contemporary education to the children of the territory while at the same time, strengthening Inuit language and culture.

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I am a social justice teacher, passionate about making sure the school I work in promotes the empowerment of students, teachers and the community at large. I am a teacher who sees how her students are struggling, and simply want to make a difference. I do not only teach Inuit students, I am a community member as well, living in the village and participating in many aspects of daily life within it. During the three years I have lived and worked in Nunavik, and I see how integral the school community is to my students' lives. Teachers in my community do not simply teach curriculum, we cook breakfast and lunch, and we run extracurricular activities. To our students, we are social workers and therapists, nurses and police officers, but most of all, we are role models and facilitators of knowledge and growth. One of the reasons I decided to complete my Master's degree was because I knew I had more to learn when it came to inclusive pedagogy and cultural safety.

As a special education teacher, I have been given the academic knowledge needed to assess and evaluate students' learning. I am responsible to the student, teachers and administration to provide support needed, confirmed through assessments that take place within the school system or as prescribed by the medical community. Part of my work is to use assessment tools with students to determine whether or not special education services are warranted according to the policy of the School Board. One of my biggest professional concerns (and concerns of my colleagues) is whether or not these assessments, created for and by the dominant Eurocentric culture, are accurately reflecting my students' learning. We must ensure that Individualized Education Plans, accommodations and modifications accurately reflect our students' learning. We can do this by ensuring our assessment tools are culturally safe.

Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is at the root of recent policy initiatives and educational discourse in Northern Canada. Culturally safe practices ensure that service providers analyse their relationship with the community in which they serve. It requires that all educational service providers work towards decolonizing their practice. Cultural safety requires that teachers, social workers, nurses, etc. must recognise their own positions of power and privilege and work to change those unequal power relationships. Cultural safety is a continuous and lifelong journey, it is a philosophy that encourages both personal and professional growth (Ball, 2007; MacFarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, & Bateman, 2007; Williams, 1999). In 2011, a document entitled: *First Canadians, Canadians First* was published by the National Strategy on Inuit Education. The National Committee on Inuit Education makes 10 recommendations in order to help close the academic and achievement gaps between Inuit students and non-Inuit students

in Canada. Recommendation six addresses the need for equitable access to diagnostic services that will assist in students' abilities to succeed within education. We can address the lack of services provided to students within the classroom by creating culturally safe assessments. This document makes recommendations that not only ensure the equitable access to education, but also that the services are provided in consultation with Inuit communities to determine their effectiveness. Assessment tools within the school system should also fall under these requirements in order to ensure that students' are benefiting from their results.

Mueller (2006) states 'The high turnover rate of Qallunaat (non-Inuit) teachers is one important contributing factor to the lack of success of Inuit children in school. Teachers remain on average 2 years in their host communities and then leave' (p. 432). Mueller also quotes a teacher from her study, who speaks about the difficulties faced by teachers within the schools: 'The clash between our sense of educational culture and the one that exists here in the community . . . might be the biggest concern' (p. 433). These 'clashes' that Mueller writes about would not only be addressed in culturally safe education system, but also in a school board which promoted culturally safe practices, non-Inuit educators would receive the support and professional development needed to explore and analyse the reason why these clashes are happening. Creating the environment that encourages an understanding of Inuit worldview and knowledge is a step towards creating culturally safe school communities, where Inuit students know that their culture is being respected. This would ensure that Qallunaat teachers feel confident in their ability to teach in a meaningful way.

Macfarlane et al. (2007) argue that:

Creating a culture of care in schools – culturally- safe classrooms and culturally-safe schools – involves challenging and reviewing the systemic processes and practices that exist. Education for students within classrooms and schools (. . .) must be responsive to the learning needs and cultural values of those students (p. 72).

Cultural safety is not only about providing adequate, equitable, inclusive and culturally safe services to Inuit groups, but also includes the vision that non-Inuit people providing the services are given the knowledge and opportunity to understand the culture and worldview of the people they are working for.

Cultural safety in education provides tools and opportunity for those of us who are a part of the dominant culture to understand the importance of knowing our students and their communities on a human-to-human level. It gives us the chance to be a part of the process that these communities are undergoing to empower themselves and make their own success.

Williams (1999) writes that cultural safety creates an environment 'where there is not assault, challenge or denial of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity and truly listening' (p. 213). Williams also states within the article that people who are working in 'cross-cultural situations must address this issue at all professional and personal levels' (1999, p. 213). Cultural safety in Nunavik means that Qallunaat and Inuit work together to ensure the success of their students, celebrate and respect Inuit culture and continue to provide compassionate and holistic support to all members of the school community.

Assessment

In terms of assessment, many teachers struggle to create an accurate profile of their students' learning. Resources are not as easily available in an isolated northern community as they are elsewhere in Canada. Level B assessments, as they are known, include tests such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test, now in its fourth edition (PPVT-4), the Kaufman Test of Education Achievement, third edition (KTEA-3) and Key Math. These assessment tools are used throughout schools in Canada, and can provide insight into students' learning. As stated earlier, the focus of this paper will be on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test as an example of the problems with using 'southern' assessments in a northern Inuit school board.

According to Pearson Clinical Online (2016), 'level B' tests are to be administered by a person with 'a master's degree in psychology, education, occupational therapy, social work, or in a field closely related to the intended use of the assessment, and formal training in the ethical administration, scoring and interpretation of clinical assessments'. These tests are used with students who have been referred by their teachers in order to create a learning profile that may contribute to Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and other resource or special education services.

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-4) is designed to measure receptive vocabulary. This test has no particular age range and can be used for children and adults. The PPVT-4 is a nonverbal assessment and according to the Pearson Clinical website, should only take 10 to 15 minutes to administer. An administrator of this test would ask a student to point out an image from a selection of four. Images include people, animals and activities.

Mushquash and Bova (2007) state that present assessments were never built with Indigenous (including Inuit) cultures in mind. The Eurocentric framework for which the PPVT-4 is designed makes it unsuitable for use with Inuit students. If children are assessed using these tools without consideration of their worldview or knowl-

edge base, results will not be authentic and could mislead teachers and schools to create programs that are not culturally safe or academically supportive for these students.

A major part of what makes most assessment tools culturally unsafe is the fact that they are stand-alone assessments. Inuit culture is largely holistic, with education being a means of teaching about life skills, community interactions, relationships, self-growth and discovery. Assessing a child in a way that does not seem meaningful or relevant to their life and culture is inauthentic and therefore meaningless, as it does not respect the learning of the whole child. Individualized assignments without context are not relevant to Inuit learning. Students who feel they are reflected in the content of the assessment are more likely to perform better, and results will accurately reflect their learning abilities.

In Canada, Eurocentric knowledge is assumed as the base of understanding. In the modern Canadian classroom, we are not promoting culturally safe practices when we ignore the distinction between Eurocentric and Inuit knowledge. If teachers and schools want accurate representations of their students' learning abilities, the assessments must recognise that 'common sense' is only common to the dominant culture. We must receive the support to educate ourselves about the worldview of our students, or we risk colonizing their learning. The academic and achievement gaps will only widen if we continue to use assessment tools as they are.

When it comes to the PPVT-4, images used throughout the assessment assume that the child being tested has some prior knowledge of animals, people, actions, things, etc. To assume that a child living in an isolated northern community can identify animals and items that are not a part of their linguistic culture is an example of a culturally unsafe practice. By using terms like 'common', we project the dominant culture (the colonial culture) onto Inuit culture. I argue that the number of images that are irrelevant to Inuit knowledge and culture present within the PPVT-4 can cause inauthentic results and therefore inaccurately reflect the learning profile of an Inuit student. The assessment tool must promote the philosophy of cultural safety, and the person administering the assessment must have an understanding of that child's culture and worldview.

According to the publication summary form of the PPVT-4, the test itself was 'empirically analysed for difficulty, validity (discrimination), and freedom from bias with respect to sex, ethnicity, geographic region and SES (socioeconomic status)' (Peabody summary, Pearson Clinical Online). These attributes include the quantitative data and results collected, which according to the summary of the PPVT-4 helps make sure the test is free from bias. However, the results for race/ethnicity are all based on American population statistics. The statistics are as follows:

Age norm sample:

- African American: 536
- Hispanic: 546
- White: 2244
- Other: 214*

Grade norm sample:

- African American: 316
- Hispanic: 318
- White: 1243
- Other: 126*

*Includes American Indians, Alaska Natives, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and all other groups not classified as African American, Hispanic or White.

To say that the PPVT-4 is guaranteed to be culturally unbiased for Inuit students is incorrect according to the statistics shown above. The guarantee of freedom from bias is solely based on American schooling standards. Inuit children are not represented at all. This is why Mushquash and Bova (2007) state (along with Ball, and many other researchers) that if current assessments like the PPVT-4 are to be used, then the assessor must be aware of the bias of these examinations, and also be aware of the worldview and cultural differences of their students whom they are assessing. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary test, as it exists today, is not a culturally safe assessment tool for Inuit students.

The underrepresentation of Inuit children within the preliminary review of the assessment itself is one of first and main reasons why assessments like the PPVT-4 are not completely culturally safe assessment tools. When a culture is thus underrepresented, then the tool will not be culturally safe, as cultural safety is determined by the recipient of the service, not the service provider (Brascoupe & Waters, 2009). If Inuit communities are not part of the process of developing assessment tools in education, then those tools will remain biased towards Eurocentric knowledge and worldview, making them culturally unsafe.

The PPVT-4 is a 'measure of receptive vocabulary for Standard American English' (Pearson Clinical); therefore, it cannot be culturally unbiased. The test normalises the dominant culture and by doing so it isolates and 'others' students who are not a part of 'standard American' culture. Tests such as this one are being used in many communities, by many schools. If we value the diversity of our students, how can we in good conscience use tests that were not made in the spirit of celebrating diversity and acknowledging different forms of intelligence and learning? Why would we not move towards creating assessments with the communities we work for? Companies providing learning assessments should be working towards creating culturally safe assessments in consultation with school boards and the communities in which they serve.

In diverse linguistic cultures, verbal and nonverbal assessments must reflect cultural nuances, and those who are assessing students must be aware of these cultural nuances. We should not assume that in isolated northern communities children know animals, items and symbols that are not readily available and part of the linguistic culture. Presuming that Eurocentric knowledge 'common knowledge' disregards and disrespects the knowledge and worldview of the Inuit children who are subjected to assessments like the PPVT-4. We must understand that what tests deem as the standard knowledge base for children and adults at certain ages is presuming those children and adults are a part of the standard American culture and community. Assessment tools from companies like Pearson Clinical were not created with Inuit students in mind. However, they are still being used with students because as of yet, few options (if any) exist.

According to the Nunavut Ministry of Education (2008), assessment practice should directly reflect Inuit culture in order to ensure accurate results and equitable support for Inuit children. Assessment, according to the document, is 'a collaborative process that involves all partners in the learning/teaching community' (p. 24). In order for students to benefit best from assessments, they must reflect their own definition of learning and success. This document goes thorough detail about different kinds of assessments and relates them to Inuit culture in order to make the assessment process relevant. This is a key factor in the concept of cultural safety.

The Nunavut Ministry of education has compared their assessments for, of and about learning to Inuit tools used to assess the thickness of ice. According to the document, the *sabgut* or *nakkuti* are the symbols (tools) used to relate assessment in education to Inuit culture. 'The *sabgut* is a tool used for finding good snow for *iglu* building or for testing the thickness of ice. The *sabgut* or *nakkuti* is an essential tool for survival on the land. Using it properly requires practice' (p. 24). In this way, the ministry has encouraged both Inuit and non-Inuit teachers to understand the assessment process. We use the right tool for the job, but first we need to know which tool is the right one to use. This process seems straightforward and simple. However, diagnostic assessment tools that are used with Inuit children in Nunavik schools (where I work) still do not reflect or respect Inuit ways of knowing. We cannot expect our students to understand the assessment tools being used, if the assessment tools being used do not acknowledge or understand our students.

Recommendations

Where can we go from here? Clearly, there are many steps that must be taken in order to create and administer

culturally safe assessments. There are several recommendations that I have provided that may be considered in order to promote culturally safe practice, and begin the process to create culturally safe assessment tools for Inuit students in Nunavik.

1. Companies who advertise their assessment tools as 'culturally unbiased' cannot make such a statement. Rather, they (along with the school board) should be consulting with Inuit communities in regards to the academic and cultural validity of their assessments and should be working towards creating assessment tools that reflect Inuit culture, knowledge and values.
2. Individuals who are presently administering assessments must have an understanding and appreciation of the Inuit culture of their students. They must be provided consistent and continuous professional development in culturally safe practices.
3. Teachers must be supported through professional development programs to ensure the provision of culturally safe assessments. School boards must work with teachers, parents and students to ensure success in education.
4. Assessments (like curriculum) must reflect the framework of cultural safety and support the process of reconciliation with Inuit (and Indigenous) peoples. These tools must acknowledge that all ways of learning are valid and celebrated.

Each of these recommendations makes cultural safety the responsibility of the organization, not the individual being tested. We cannot and should not expect Inuit children to conform to our Eurocentric ways of knowing, or ways of interpreting information. Rather, we should acknowledge that how our children learn (regardless of culture, religion, etc.) and, indeed, all ways of learning are not only accepted, but encouraged. It is a culturally unsafe practice for a teacher or administrator to project their personal definitions of success, learning and ability onto their students. If we want assessment tools to accurately reflect our students' learning, before we make any diagnosis, we must ensure that those assessment tools support our students' understanding. We have to create meaningful educational experiences for the children and the communities that we serve. The legacy of the Canadian education system in the north is a traumatic one for many Inuit people. Today, our schools should be proactive in creating an educational experience for students and their families, an experience that not only gives them the tools to embrace the 21st century, but also to embrace it as proud Inuit people.

If our teachers are adequately supported and prepared to create culturally safe classrooms that include using culturally safe assessment tools, our students in the North will be better prepared to succeed. Educators must be supported and provided with the professional development tools that will assist them both personally and professionally as teachers in the North. As a Qallunaat educator myself, I know how challenging teaching in northern communities can be. We are trying to teach our students while at the same time, learning about a community and culture that is very different from ours. Support from our colleagues and the administration is a key to ensure that non-Inuit teachers decide to stay longer than the average two years. When it comes to collaborating with the Inuit communities where we work, we have a wonderful opportunity to understand how the assessment tools that we are using interpret the culture and knowledge of our students. When given the tools to succeed, teachers as well as students can thrive within their classrooms. In modern Inuit communities, both Inuit and non-Inuit teachers should be supported in their desire to create safe spaces and meaningful relationships with their students.

My main graduate research focuses on providing those professional development tools and workshops for both Qallunaat and Inuit teachers in order to create these spaces of learning where support is evident on a professional and personal level, and students may succeed as not simply students, but Inuit students. An important part of the creation of culturally safe classrooms is the creation of culturally safe assessments within those classrooms. If we are going to use Individual Education Plans and special education services within our schools, we must do everything we can to ensure that students using these services are adequately supported. Cooperation with the Inuit people is essential to ensuring that our special education services (which include assessment) are culturally safe and provide an equitable opportunity for our students to succeed.

My recommendations come not only from my time as a researcher, but also from my experience as a teacher in the North, as someone who has stayed (and will continue to stay) beyond the average couple of years. As an educator, I wish to contribute to the process of reconciliation between Qallunaat and Inuit within Nunavik, to my students' learning and success and to the success of my colleagues. If school boards, administrators, teachers and parents want to address school dropouts, teacher retention and academic and achievement gaps, we need to start by helping educators understand their students, their communities and their culture.

Assessment tools like the PPVT-4 can be used to help teachers understand how their students learn, but they must also reflect the worldview and prior knowledge of that student in order to give an authentic result. Assessment is only one part of education, but is a part that can

provide necessary insight to teachers, parents and schools that can help educators understand how best to promote their students' learning and for students to see themselves as learners. Ensuring the effectiveness of an assessment should be the priority of any School Board. For School Boards created to serve Inuit students, providing culturally safe services should be, according to Williams,

A matter of priority for any organization involved in service delivery for Indigenous clients has to be to critically evaluate their work practice and determine pathways to genuine empowerment for the aforementioned clients and all the Indigenous stakeholders. Otherwise the rhetoric of self-determination, social justice and reconciliation will never become reality (p. 213).

If we can begin to understand Inuit culture and worldview, we can begin to understand how assessment tools must be treated as a part of the holistic view of education. This is our responsibility as service providers within these communities. We must ensure that the education we are providing empowers the students of Nunavik and encourages the process of reconciliation between Inuit and Qallunaat culture. Presently, if we wish to use diagnostic assessment tools, we can only use what is provided, like the PPVT-4. We can, however, take the responsibility as administrators of the test to ensure that we understand how it is potentially culturally unsafe, and as a school board, actively take the steps needed to create culturally safe assessment tools for future use. One way we can do this is to, as Williams writes, critically evaluate our own practice and decide how we can ensure that what we are doing to help the students within the school community will benefit the student within their community outside of the school as well.

Assessment tools are a necessary part of education. In order for educators to ensure the equity and success of their students, assessments and evaluations are used in the classroom, resource room and throughout the school system. Today, when it comes to assessment tools that are used to analyse what a student may need, many assessment tools are available for the use of trained professionals, and are viewed as a good resource in helping teachers and parents determine how to best help their children get the most out of their education. However, these tools are designed according to Eurocentric knowledge and values, which is an issue in the education of Inuit students.

Assessment tools that do not reflect and therefore do not value Inuit knowledge and culture equitably pose a serious problem for Inuit students and their communities. Misdiagnosis of students' learning abilities, due to culturally unsafe assessments poses a real threat to an Inuit child's ability to succeed in school, and also poses a threat to the process of reconciliation which this country must embrace in order to ensure the safe, secure and successful futures of Canada's Inuit peoples. To continue to use culturally unsafe assessment tools is both inequitable and

unethical. With the publication of the final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), we have an opportunity to move towards reconciliation in this country and we have the research to support it. If assessment tools do not ensure that our students are all given an equitable chance of success, then they are not culturally safe for our students. If we want to give each of our students a chance to succeed and celebrate their learning through culture, community and caring, we must ensure that culturally safe assessment tools are created and readily available, and that they become an essential part of the culturally safe school and classroom.

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