Finding Fitting Solutions to Assessment of Indigenous Young Children's Learning and Development: Do It in a Good Way

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Standardized, norm-referenced assessments of young children's learning and development pose a number of challenges when used with Indigenous children, beginning with the very notion of the construct "early childhood" that runs counter to some Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Indigenous community leaders and knowledge keepers reject the idea that all children should develop according to a homogenizing universal standard that is not grounded in specific culturally based goals and practices surrounding children's development and does not respect each child's unique character. Three key problems arise with creating appropriate assessment of Indigenous young children's learning and development: 1) assessment in early childhood programs is often done from the perspective of whether children are on track to be ready for school; 2) school systems, early childhood programs, and practitioners face a barrage of pressure to measure children's "progress" against universalist norms derived from Euro-Western ways of knowing and goals for children's development; and 3) knowledge of diverse Indigenous young children's varied lived experiences in today's urban and rural communities is extremely limited. This paper discusses these obstacles and draws from the author's many years of collaborating with Indigenous children, families, and communities to co-create culturally relevant assessment in a good way.

INTRODUCTION

"We always hear that 'children are our future.' But they are also here now! We need to see children now, and get to know them as they are now, and not only think of them as people who have not yet fully arrived." A Cree knowledge keeper voiced this perspective in a meeting when I was a member of a mostly Indigenous technical advisory council for (Statistics Canada, 2006) Aboriginal Children's Survey. Many of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis members of this council expressed concern, both about what they perceived as a lack of appreciation for the gifts young children bring with them into the world and about the inadequate response to the immediate unmet needs of many Indigenous young children. While the slogan "children are our future" may be intended to express hope for what the next generation of adults will be able to do for their communities, it also insinuates a neoliberal view of children as human capital. Investment in early childhood programs, assessment, and early childhood intervention is often rationalized as essential to ensure a supply of human resources to

meet future market demands while also growing the middle class because their consumer needs fuel our capitalist economy.

When I codirected an early childhood educator diploma program in partnership with ten culturally distinct groups of First Nations in Canada, we used a generative curriculum model in which local cultural knowledge keepers contributed half the curriculum of the 20 courses while university professors contributed the other half (Ball, 2003; Ball and Pence, 2006). Elders of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council began by questioning the very construct of early childhood, asking why non-Indigenous theories of development as well as training, education, and service programs divide childhood into segments: early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence. They perceived continuity across the years before adulthood and wondered what is gained and lost by fragmenting children's lives into a series of seemingly arbitrary periods, just as they argued against separating children by age in early childhood programs.

The way the lifespan is segmented according to age and expected roles is not innocuous—it gives rise to a prescribed set of expectations and responses based on children's ages, which are then inscribed in parent education, educator training, and ways that specialists make meaning of their observations during an assessment. For example, "young children" are expected to learn through play until they are six. "School-aged children" are required to learn through sitting for long periods following instructions and listening to others; they are no longer in "early childhood" and their behaviors should show they are "school ready." In North America, professional education for schoolteachers is completely different than professional education for early childhood educators. School teachers are expected to be able to teach any grade level from kindergarten to grade six (and to grade twelve in some provinces and territories), because children in those grades are "school aged." School teachers are also paid and valued significantly more than early childhood educators. There is a guaranteed publicly funded space in school for every school-aged child in North America, whereas spaces in early learning programs for "young children" are catch-as-catch-can. Young children are not yet valued as citizens of today; they are only citizens in waiting: waiting to be six, waiting to be the future.

Indigenous knowledge keepers often express concern about the apparent lack of valuing of childhood as a special, even sacred time of life that is "for itself," when children explore their connection to the world, including the spirit world (Ball, 2012). If educators focus on these first years of life as being mainly about getting ready for the next years of life, we miss the preciousness of each breathing moment. Indigenous colleagues insist that when children go to school, this should be a time to explore and develop one's gifts, not only a training ground for postsecondary education or employment. Indigenous scholar Cajete (2000, p. 183) explains: "There is a shared body of understanding among many Indigenous peoples that education is really about helping an individual find his or her face, which means finding out who you are, where you come from, and your unique character." What might shift if childhood were imagined as a time of being children and not only as a time of becoming adults?

In another First Nations partnership for community-based delivery of the early childhood diploma program, local community knowledge keepers asked why we have words for developmental lag or décalage to describe children as developing "on time" in some domains and being delayed, according to age norms, in other domains. They perceived a problem-generating insistence on sameness: that ideally, all children should develop evenly across all domains according to a homogenizing universal standard. They argued that we create worry for parents and undue fuss in public health, child protection services, or early childhood programs about children who show variation in developing competencies across domains. An Elder-in-residence at an urban Indigenous child care program on Vancouver Island put it this way: "If they're just a little behind with this or that skill, give them time. They'll catch up. Maybe their mind is busy thinking through something else they are experiencing." The Indigenous program staff agreed that, essentially, if a child is really behind in everything, then they need to do something more for that child. But too much surveillance and comparison with everyone else can create problems where there aren't any. As the Step By Step Child and Family Center (2015) of Kahnawake Mohawk Territory said: "The use of standardized assessments presents a number of unique challenges most especially to our belief and that of many Indigenous people that formal tests which carve children into developmental pieces or domains do not reflect our world view and are fundamentally not helpful" (p. 2). For me, these conversations stimulated my thinking about assessment as a form of colonial surveillance. It can reinscribe a dominant societal expectation that children will develop according to a script that is assumed to be universal, crushing sources of variation that may come from within a child or signify their enculturation with a particular language, cultural, family, and community ecosystem.

The problem-generating results of typical assessment with many Indigenous children are all too obvious. Large numbers of Indigenous children are diagnosed with various developmental delays and pathologies by the time they start school. Some assessment findings, such as the high prevalence of otitis media and resulting speech deficits in First Nations and Inuit children, are indicators of poverty, with its attendant crowded, poor-quality housing, indoor air pollution, low food security, and low access to quality health care. Yet assessment rarely identifies the primary problems as exogenous to the child or their caregivers. Assessment is focused on the child, and it is assumed that pathology exists within the child, not in federal government policies that fail to honor age-old agreements with First Nations or Inuit people, or in community leadership that privileges some families over others when distributing grants for home repairs. The child is seen as deficient and the primary caregivers are charged with the responsibility to access remedial services. Sometimes the real or perceived threat of the child being taken into government care is the punitive incentive for caregivers to comply with recommendations from assessments that use universalized developmental norms and see the individual child as the only relevant focus of assessment and target of remediation.

In many settings, educational psychologists and clinical ancillary service professionals such as speech-language pathologists visit Indigenous preschools, schools, or communities and diagnose many children as having special

needs. An aware professional knows that it could be years before services will actually be provided to any of those children. Community members often grieve this seemingly mindless, damaging, fly-by service. Clinical ancillary services for First Nations children living in land-based communities (on reserve) are not funded by the federal government. This often drives Indigenous parents to establish temporary residence off reserve to access services for their child. However, in urban settings, Indigenous and non-Indigenous children alike often languish for years on wait lists for remedial services for learning disabilities, speech-language therapy, and other supports. Funding gaps for assessment and services for children with special needs have been alleviated to some extent as a result of Jordan's Principle, which requires the federal government to cover costs of necessary health interventions and supports and determine provincial fiduciary responsibilities only after health care has been provided (Government of Canada, 2021). However, despite the central tenet of Jordan's Principle, federal and provincial bodies continue to engage in adversarial legal and policy techniques to delay its implementation (Johnson, 2015; Blackstock, 2016).

Many children have development delays or challenges that are due to the family's lack of resources or understanding of how to access programs that could support their parenting. This obstacle could potentially be alleviated by employing a navigator to advocate for children or their families and to help them access needed resources and services (Anderson and Larke, 2009). Some children lack certain kinds of stimulation or experiences that could be addressed by early childhood educators who live and work in the community. Further, when results of assessment are communicated to parents, community leaders, government agencies (and too often to local news media), the whole community may be left feeling shamed and worried for their children and second-guessing their parenting skills, with no resources or supports to provide anything different (Ball and Lemare, 2011). A guiding principle of culturally safe practice is to have a positive purpose and to make it matter (Ball and Beazley, 2017). Yet assessment is often done because it is mandated or seems, mindlessly, like a first step. The next steps that might result in a substantive, positive outcome that matters for the child are often not thought out, and if they were, a significant portion of the funds spent on assessment would be diverted to strengthening community-based capacity to improve the quality of life for Indigenous children in communities (Ball and Simpkins, 2004). With increased access to continuing professional education, early childhood educators could provide targeted stimulation, speech and language facilitation, and other development supports to all children in a community (Ball, 2009; Ball and Lewis, 2014).

I believe that we have a hard time arriving at new ways to think about assessment of Indigenous young children's learning and development for three reasons. First, assessment in early childhood programs is often done from the perspective of whether children are on track to be ready for school. Second, school systems, early childhood programs, and practitioners face a barrage of pressure, mostly from public bureaucratic drivers (though sometimes from parents) to measure children's "progress" against universalist norms. Additionally, assessment remains very much a Euro-Western technology embedded within a worldview that implicitly or explicitly assumes that "West is best." Most professional education programs have yet to decolonize and therefore typically transmit Euro-Western values, ways of knowing, goals for children's development, norms, technologies, and tools to generations of early childhood practitioners and clinical specialists. Third, we do not actually have much intimate knowledge or insight about diverse Indigenous young children's varied lived experiences in today's urban and rural communities. I address each of these obstacles below and then discuss lessons learned in my many years of research with Indigenous children, families, and communities to cocreate culturally relevant assessment in a good way.

ASSESSMENT IN SERVICE OF SCHOOL READINESS

Important gains have been made to increase access to early childhood care and development programs in the past two decades. However, despite rhetoric about play-based, responsive, child-centered approaches, the construct of school readiness has become all-consuming, including in assessment practices. Child-centered approaches seek to understand and respond to children's interests, needs, gifts, and diverse culturally based family goals for children's development. The school readiness construct may initially have been informed by studies about how parents and programs can promote self-regulation in the early years so that children are ready to focus their attention for extended periods, tolerate frustration when faced with increasingly complex tasks, and cooperate with others (Shanker and Hoffman, 2015). However, the construct has become distorted and has led to an imbalance whereby early childhood programs and assessments focus excessively on emerging academic skills (Ashton, 2014). Governments and public schools often invoke the readiness concept to drive the literacy and numeracy goals of primary schooling down into senior and junior kindergarten and on into preschools and into the minds of parents. Consequently, parents the world over are increasingly demanding early literacy and propelled numeracy training as the focal point of nursery and preschool programs (Mahmood, 2013). Export of North America's preoccupation with school readiness to the Global South can be seen as a continuation of Euro-Western colonialism and ethnocentrism. At the same time, the singular emphasis on getting children ready for school is a signifier of neoliberalism, expecting sameness for all six-year-olds as they enter standardized schooling, with tracked progress on work-readiness skills through frequent standardized testing.

UNIVERSALIST NORMS DO NOT MEET THE NEEDS OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

Standardized tools for monitoring development, screening for development risk, and assessing atypical development have been developed and normed on a general population of children. These tools do not account for contextual and cultural differences in children's experiences or the use of nonstandard varieties of English or French, as is common in Indigenous communities (Ball and Bernhardt, 2008). They are typically administered

by people the children are unfamiliar with and whose culturally based behaviors and variant of English or French may be unfamiliar to the child and vice versa. Many Indigenous organizations insist that available tools do not provide an authentic representation of what children know and can do and that there are strengths that derive from being raised in an Indigenous family that are not tapped by tools developed by non-Indigenous researchers and standardized with reference to non-Indigenous children's developmental trajectories.

The demand that early childhood educators, teachers, and allied professionals use standardized assessment tools is thus part of a neoliberal regime that aims to move all children forward in lock-step progression with universalized Euro-Western norms of development. Those whose developmental progression deviates or whose families disagree with the hegemonic education paradigm on offer become further marginalized. Young Indigenous children and their families and communities are poorly served by neoliberal education that values uniform progression towards outcomes valued by neoliberal elites that dominate decision making about public and private investment in education. Universalism is functionally indistinguishable from monoculturalism. Despite performative displays intended to convey an embrace of multiculturalism, early childhood education and public schooling increasingly ignore the many ways in which children vary and the sources of diversity that often reside in children's home cultures and daily experiences in their families and communities. A just future depends on this diversity. Combined with the continuous erosion of biodiversity, failing to protect human diversity in ways of knowing, doing, and being puts us in double peril.

KNOWLEDGE OF INDIGENOUS CHILDHOODS IS EXTREMELY LACKING

A barrier to relevant, authentic, and holistic assessment of Indigenous children is that those who are typically responsible for conducting assessments are trying to assess what they do not know: Indigenous childhood. While there are growing retrospective accounts of Indigenous childhoods in published autobiographies by Indigenous adults, times have changed in most Indigenous families and communities. There are few authentic, detailed accounts of childhood as it is experienced in today's altered environments, communities, media, preschools, and primary schools. Studies are needed that ask Indigenous children to describe their everyday lives, how they learn about the world immediately around and beyond them, what gives them joy, what they experience in formal learning environments such as nurseries, preschools, kindergartens, and primary schools, what they learned recently and how they learned it, and what gives them confidence in themselves as capable learners, knowers, and doers.

MAKING IT OUR OWN

An abiding wish of many Indigenous communities and organizations is to create even one, or a plethora, of assessment tools that are tailor made for Indigenous children,

or specifically for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children. Soon after I moved back to Canada in 1995 after nearly 20 years away, I got a call from a First Nations organization asking if I would assist in this endeavor (and even today, these calls keep coming). Around 1998, Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada began to plan the first evaluation of Aboriginal Head Start, and discussions were convened to explore "Aboriginal-specific tools" for measuring Aboriginal children's social and cognitive development. Instead of creating new tools, early evaluations of Aboriginal Head Start used a collection of existing tools, including the Work Sampling System (Meisels et al., 2019), which generated copious qualitative data collected in various ways at different program sites, yielding an almost unwieldy volume of verbal data. There were many challenges with this foray into evaluating an Aboriginal-specific initiative in ways that adequately represented the community-specific, culturally diverse ways that the program was implemented across the country. No existing standardized tools or set of tools seemed to fit the widely varying program participants and circumstances.

Soon after the first evaluations of Aboriginal Head Start, Statistics Canada sought to conduct an inaugural national study of Aboriginal young children's living conditions, wellness, and development. They gathered a technical advisory group composed of mostly Indigenous leaders in the early childhood sector (I was honored to be included as a non-Indigenous ally). Statistics Canada asked the group to consider the plethora of standardized parent-report tools for surveying early childhood development. The group rejected all the standardized tools used in other national studies of Canadian children and youth in which Indigenous children were not purposively sampled, including the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada, 2010) and Understanding the Early Years (Government of Canada, 2011). The group wanted a survey that was unique to Indigenous children. Our motive was to create a survey tool that would reflect dimensions of children's experience and parents' goals for children that were important to Indigenous people. We also wanted to avoid unwanted one-to-one comparisons between findings about Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. Generating the Aboriginal Children's Survey was an intensive three-year process. An initial draft survey took 8 h for a parent to answer. It included questions about experiences in the bush, collecting wild bird eggs and berries, drying fish and meat, attending potlaches or participating in ceremonies, living on the land, and learning from one's elders. The survey was eventually pared down to 180 survey questions about Indigenous children's early development and their social and living conditions. The survey was administered orally by Indigenous interviewers in Indigenous languages during visits with Indigenous parents, including about 17,000 First Nations children living off reserve and Métis and Inuit children across the country. This data collection exercise has generated a number of useful publications (e.g., Findlay and Kohen, 2012, Findlay and Kohen, 2013). The survey was not repeated every five years as planned, mainly due to the cancellation of the long form of the census under Stephen

Harper's Conservative government, which prevents creation of a representative sampling frame. Interestingly, throughout the years of deliberation about what questions to include, the technical advisory group members recognized that the tremendous diversity of childhood environments, conditions, and experiences across more than 1,000 Indigenous communities in Canada meant that the uniqueness of Indigenous childhoods could not be accessed and understood through a pan-Canadian survey tool. The resulting Aboriginal Children's Survey contained many of the same development milestones found in surveys or assessment tools developed for non-Indigenous children, such as milestones in gross motor, oral language, social-emotional development, and self-regulation. Still, this was the only instance up to that time of Statistics Canada engaging a technical advisory group composed of civil society leaders who were mostly First Nations, Inuit, and Métis scholars and directors of Indigenous organizations, and the group successfully worked with Statistics Canada to produce a survey that represented Indigenous interests about Indigenous children's wellness and development.

Around the same time as the Aboriginal Children's Survey, in 2007, the Step By Step Child and Family Center (SBSCFC) in Kahnawake Mohawk Territory in Quebec explored the question of whether the standardized and widely used Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ; Squires and Bricker, 2009) was culturally appropriate, whether an "Aboriginal-specific" tool should be created, or whether the ASQ should be adapted to ensure cultural relevance.[1] They wanted a clear picture of the development of each child in their preschool program so they could provide early intervention supports if needed. In a gathering held in Kahnawake in 2010 in which I was fortunate to participate, there was consensus that tools and programs must reflect the unique cultures and linguistic richness of each Indigenous community. We debated whether a new Indigenous ASQ should be created that would include things that Indigenous children learn, including knowledge and skills for living on the land, that non-Indigenous children often do not learn. We debated whether data should be collected to establish developmental norms for Indigenous children so that interpretation of a completed ASQ would be based on understanding what is typical for Indigenous children and not necessarily what is typical for non-Indigenous children. Reluctantly, the group concluded that "given the cultural diversity to be found within the over 650 Indigenous communities in Canada speaking over 50 different languages, the prospect of developing one tool to fit all seems unattainable and, more importantly, ill-advised" (SBSCFC, p. 2). This conclusion contradicted the recommendations of the concurrent, Indigenous-authored Maternal and Child Health

Screening Tool Program (Dion-Stout and Jodoin, 2006), which called for Indigenous-led and Indigenous-specific assessment tool construction so that particular learning domains important to Indigenous communities would be included and the tool would be acceptable to Indigenous people. Thus, it was a difficult decision not to form a coalition to advocate for and possibly lead a study to design a tool by and for Indigenous people. The tremendous diversity among Indigenous people in terms of cultures, contexts, and goals for children's development was also the major challenge encountered in constructing a single survey tool for the national Aboriginal Children's Survey described earlier. However, one of the originators of the ASQ, Diane Bricker, participated in our meeting and clarified that, while the intention of each item on the ASQ should remain constant, the details of each item can be adapted to ensure relevance and meaning based on the particular cultural experience of the child. For example, if a child is learning to eat with a spoon rather than a fork, it is acceptable to reflect this in the question. If it is not acceptable for children to be given a mirror to see themselves, another question could be asked that assesses the development of a sense of having a distinctive appearance from other people. In my own study, described subsequently, First Nations in British Columbia (BC) described how they frequently make these kinds of small adaptations to ensure cultural relevance.

The most valuable outcome of the Kahnawake project was the creation of guiding principles for using the ASQ in culturally appropriate ways, encapsulated in the beautifully articulated document "Finding Our Own Way" (SBSCFC, 2015). These principles include 1) making it your own: create a community-based process; 2) involve the broader community; 3) take a capacity-building view; 4) engage the family; 5) provide service worker orientation and training; and 6) review your practice. The guidelines conclude with advice that exhorts those doing assessment to make an effort to really see the Indigenous child: "Any community-based process of screening and assessment must be balanced by a view of discovering both challenges and capabilities. We must celebrate the gifts and respect the differences which are unique to every child and family, and we must have the courage to continue to advocate for the recognition of the critical role Indigenous cultural values and beliefs have in the development of a vibrant, meaningful, pedagogically sound and sustainable educational system for our children" (SBSCFC, 2015, p. 13).

MULTIPLE VANTAGE POINTS ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

No assessment should depend on a single source of information, whether this is a tool or a parent interview or observation by a practitioner. Good assessment incorporates multiple sources of information, including observations of strengths and challenges that may reflect the child's cultural context. The persisting concern in Indigenous programs about whether standardized assessment tools can adequately represent Indigenous children's strengths and difficulties has prompted many Indigenous practitioners to create their own checklists, to hone their observational skills, and to

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[1]The Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) is a parent-completed screening tool composed of 19 age-specific questionnaires, with six questions in each of five developmental domains: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal and social abilities. Recent studies have shown that it is a valid and useful tool for First Nations children. Item content can be adapted to make it relevant to the culture and lifestyle of local children without reducing the validity of the ASQ.

strengthen their capacities to bring educators, caregivers, and specialists together to share impressions of a child's development. The main goal is to tap into observations of the child from different points of view and across a range of activities and settings where the child will naturally be called upon to display different kinds of capacities across sensory, cognitive, language, social, emotional, spiritual, wellness, fine motor, and gross motor domains. The mystique surrounding standardized assessment of young children is wearing off, and the concept of triangulated or multiple sources of observations and insights is gaining acceptance.

The need for multiple viewpoints on a child's development and for an approach that considers a child's development within the context of what is expected and typical for children within their particular community was emphasized in a study of speech-language pathologists' experiences (Ball and Lewis, 2011). Among 70 speech-language pathologists across Canada who had served Indigenous young children for at least two years, 49 reported in an online questionnaire that their standardized measurement tools did not yield valid or useful information and their best practices for early intervention were not helpful in their practice with Indigenous children. They overwhelmingly called for "an altogether different approach"—one that is responsive to local goals and conditions for young children's speech-language development and that actively involves parents and other caregivers as primary supports for children's early learning.

WHICH TOOLS?

The typical pathway from everyday observations of children to more structured processes goes from 1) a system for recording changes in a child's knowledge, skills, and interests, to 2) a more systematic process for monitoring changes, often through narrative approaches or checklists, to 3) use of a screening tool like the ASQ (Squires and Bricker, 2009) or the Looksee checklist[2] (McMaster University, 2020), to 4) referral for diagnostic assessment and 5) referral for service or a determination that no special intervention is needed. In all of these steps, it is essential to have conversations with the child, their primary caregivers, and others who have regular contact with the child, since they can be valuable sources of information and insight.

For all children, developmental monitoring, screening, and assessment can include a wide range of formal and informal, quantitative and qualitative approaches.[3] In Canada, some programs

use an existing observation system like the ASQ, and many create their own observation checklists. In Aboriginal Head Start programs in Canada (including approximately 406 in land-based or "on reserve" communities and 134 in urban and northern communities) there is no mandated assessment tool. Programs often combine direct observation with structured observation systems, most frequently the ASQ (Squires and Bricker, 2009) or the Looksee (McMaster University, 2020), the Child Observation Record (HighScope, 2021), or the Work Sampling System (Meisels et al., 2019).

In a study I conducted in 2008, the ASQ was the tool preferred by 82 First Nations in BC who responded to an online survey (Ball, 2008) and it continues to be widely used. However, while ASQ is technically intended as a screening tool to identify children who may need early intervention services, First Nations in BC described using it as a "conversation starter" between early childhood educators and parents. Some First Nations also described using it as an information tool to raise parents' awareness of the wide range of things to notice about their child's growth and development. One parent commented: "I picked up the ASQ form in my parent communication folder at the early childhood center and went over it at home. My kids were playing on the floor, and I started just looking at what they were doing while I was reading the different items on the form, figuring out what they could and couldn't do, or what they were trying to do. The next week was like a course in child development! I was paying attention to so much more and seeing so much more about everything they were learning and how they were each different and the differences between their different ages." Very few First Nations described actually seeking a fully completed ASQ record that was scored and used as a screener.

People who spend a lot of time with a child are usually in the best position to observe the child's progress and to understand their interests, developing skills, and learning needs. Information gathered may include, for example, observations of the child's play; descriptions and observations of their art, music, social skills, and puzzle play; developmental checklists; and the child's performance on formal, standardized tests. Importantly, people close to the child are best able to put these observations into context with reference to the child's opportunities for experiences and practice, the child's culture, and the languages the child may be hearing and learning in their home. With some understanding of child development in context and seeing what other children in the same cultural and language community can do at different ages, parents and educators are often the first to notice when something about a child's development seems off track. It takes a team to raise a child, and all team members are a child's Most Valuable Players!

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS

Close observation and regular documentation of a child's interests, progress, sources of frustration, and stories the child tells is a good way to monitor a child's development. Conversations with primary caregivers encouraging them to share observations or stories of their child across a range of situations round out a view of the child's progress and needs. Sharing narrative accounts of a child's demonstrations of how and what they learn underpins the "learning stories" approach

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[2]The Looksee, formerly known as the Nipissing Developmental District Screener (https://www.lookseechecklist.com/) is completed by a parent or child care professional. It consists of 14 age-specific questionnaires up to age 6. It explores vision, hearing, speech, language, communication, gross motor, fine motor, cognitive, social/emotional development, and self-help. Each questionnaire includes a page of tips for primary caregivers to provide age-appropriate activities and play materials for their child.

[3]A description and review of 25 tools used in early childhood is available on the University of Alberta Community-University Partnership website. https://www.ualberta.ca/community-university-partnership/resources/early-childhood-measurement-tool-reviews/assessment-tools.html. The Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships program at the University of Victoria provides reports on the ASQ and guidance for educators about screening and assessment at http://www.ecdip.org.

that originated in Aotearoa/New Zealand and is increasingly used in early childhood programs around the world (Carr and Lee, 2012). Learning stories is an approach that uses observation, narrative, photos, drawings, and child-selected pieces to create a portfolio that conveys a child's learning and changes over time. This documentation encourages everyone—the child, parent(s), and educators—to "tell their story" about the child's experiences. For example, soon after a child starts a program, the educator observes the child and writes a story about the child's first days. This is sent to the primary caregivers, setting the tone for their relationship with family members as conversational, open, curious, and collaborative. Educators are encouraged to consider how the learning stories recognize and show the child taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, communicating ideas, and taking responsibility. The practice of pedagogical documentation, which originated with the Reggio Emilia approach to children's programs (see Stacey, 2015) has a similar intention and process to learning stories. Work sampling is also similar, though more structured and focused on certain kinds of developing skills. This and other structured but non-numerical assessment systems typically incorporate the concept of domains of development, which can have the risk of fragmenting understandings of a child while potentially failing to notice skills a child is working on that are not "on the list." Qualitative (or non-numerical) approaches are not innocent of preconceived, typically dominant cultural values. Using multiple approaches to assessment helps to ensure that a child's holistic development is seen and understood.

INDIGENOUS PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT

Studies have shown that most young Indigenous parents are receptive to the use of mainstream assessment tools. They want to know: Is my child developing well? What can I do to help my child stay on track? Does my child need any special supports? If their child needs extra support, many parents want to know what they can do and where to go for services if needed. This was the conclusion of an "Indigenous Child" study I conducted with four First Nations communities in BC from 2003 to 2008 (Ball and Janyst, 2008). Two communities were land based (on reserve) and two were located in small urban centers. Parents, early childhood educators, community leaders, and Elders were asked to explore the goals, tools, and processes of a collection of developmental screening and assessment approaches and tools. In all four communities, most parents of young children leaned in favor of standardized assessment "when it is done in a good way." Early childhood educators in all four communities also favored formal assessment tools. Elders in all the communities were less favorable towards standardized assessment. Many expressed the view that "our children are gifts on loan to us from the Creator. They all have gifts and should never be seen as deficient." Many Elders commented that assessment was part of a problematic idea that all children should be the same, and that "book smarts" are the most valued asset in mainstream assessment. One Elder commented: "A child doesn't have to

be a brainiac to develop their gifts and be successful in life. I bet he could be a good cook or she could be good with animals and we all need people who can do that." Another Elder commented: "They don't ask whether children know their Indigenous language or what children know about how to behave in different social settings or in ceremony. Schools aren't interested in children learning their culture so they don't assess that."

Most study participants commented that the concerns they had with assessment were not about the tools per se; rather, they were concerned about the ways that tools are used. Participants recounted instances of screening or assessment being done in their child's program in ways that were, in my view, unethical and culturally disrespectful. Stories recalled assessment being done without parents' knowledge or informed consent and assessment results being provided to early childhood educators or other professionals but not to parents, with little or no explanation to the child about what was being done and why. One land-based community retrieved a local newspaper article in which results of an assessment done with children in their early childhood program were reported publicly, with a negative comparison to children in the nearby, mostly non-Indigenous community. A parent asserted: "If something like that is going to be done with my child, I want to know about it!" Another said, "If a total stranger is going to take my child into a room and close the door, I need to be there to explain to my child what is happening." In sum, the findings showed receptivity to assessment, especially on the parts of a young generation of parents, as well as concerns—not about the tools but about the process (Ball and Janyst, 2008; Ball and Lemare, 2011).

Bad practice does not necessarily reflect on the utility or validity of the tool itself, but rather on the person who is using it, and how and why they are using it. A good (or adequate) tool in the hands of a poor craftsperson will not produce a useful outcome. Heavy-handed use of mainstream tools by insensitive, unfamiliar practitioners has too often resulted in alienating Indigenous parents, frightening children, and decontextualized interpretations of a child's performance on assessment tasks. Poor practice has produced overdiagnosis of developmental delay, deficits, and disorders, with implications for stigma, inappropriate interventions, exclusion, and, at worst, child apprehension. The importance of contextualized and triangulated interpretation of assessment observations has been discussed previously. The importance of culturally safe and ethical practice will be discussed next.

ETHICAL PRACTICE AND CULTURAL SAFETY

Good process and adaptations of an assessment tool to ensure local relevance and meaning are always possible. Before choosing what types of information-gathering techniques to use, we must ask: 1) What do we want to know about this child? 2) Why do we want to know this? 3) What kinds of information do we need to gather? 4) How will we gather the necessary information? 5) What will we do with this information once we gather it? Thus, the first steps are to know the goal of assessment, consider the wide range of possible approaches, engage in respectful

conversations with primary caregivers, children, and early childhood practitioners before deciding how to proceed, and ensure there is a positive purpose. Informed consent and respectful, relational practice that yields experiences of cultural safety for children and parents are key. It is crucial to have conversations with parents and early childhood practitioners to share initial interpretations of the assessment and ask whether the interpretation concurs with their observations. These conversations can generate responses from primary caregivers or others close to the child about how to understand the results of assessment from a cultural lens and within the context of the child's experiences, exposures to language(s), overall health, family life, and other important determinants of children's wellness. Assessment that indicates a concern must be followed up with referrals to specialized services and navigation support to facilitate a secure and positive connection between children and their caregivers and specialized service practitioners. When children are going to languish on a waitlist for specialized services for months or even years, assessment must be done in conjunction with a commitment to make it matter by providing interim supports to children and families through local child and family programs that can be provided without delay. Assessment can harm if it is done without meaningful follow-through. Professionals cannot claim to be naïve about the general deficit of services and supports to children, especially those living in poverty. Assessment that leaves only a trail of diagnostic labels, stigma, learned helplessness, and a number on an interminable waitlist is unethical.

Being both curious and cautious about standardized systems and external demands for monitoring, screening, and assessment is prudent. When done in a good way, with respect for parent and child rights, awareness of local contexts, and a collaborative, relational approach, these processes can promote engagement with children and their family members, deepen our understanding of each child's unique gifts, and point to ways to best nurture them.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

I have had the privilege of working with Indigenous communities in Canada and in countries in South and Southeast Asia. Without romanticizing childhoods in unacceptably poor and often violent environments, it is remarkable what neurotypical preschool-aged children are able to do—caring for children even younger than themselves, assisting farming parents by planting seedlings in exactly spaced rows, carefully selecting beans with just the right degree of ripeness, sorting and packing fruit into bags, and knowing how to spot a dangerous snake and what to do if one comes close. Many children can manage a complicated tiffin set to feed themselves lunch and have often been toilet trained since they were 1-year-olds. Yet these same children would likely score low on an assessment of "emergent literacy" or "emergent numeracy." Typically exposed to two languages—at least one at home and another in the village—they would likely be seen as delayed on a standard test of verbal fluency, but when they are adolescents, they will likely have multilingual skills that put them far ahead of monocultural children in metalinguistic awareness and proficiency. They would likely be assessed as having the self-

regulation needed to sit quietly in a desk or take their turn at a water fountain at school. But in an urban kindergarten in a middle- or high-income country, they would be scored low on the Early Development Inventory by a typical teacher and would be assessed as not school ready even when they are 7 or 8 years old. Yet they are already contributing to family income generation, have exceptional self-care skills, know how to be proactive to protect themselves from monsoon rain and mosquitoes, and have more emotional self-regulation and social skills than many Canadian 10-year-olds. What we assess is what we value. What we value depends on our goals for children's development and the context we are in that supports achievement of those goals for those who hold a sufficiently privileged position in our society to access those supports. Poor children and children in remote and isolated communities, including many Indigenous children, rarely hold that privileged position. And their communities likely provide support for developing other kinds of knowledge and skills, using ways of sensing and knowing that diverge from, or may be in addition to, those of non-Indigenous children in urban settings.

There is widespread agreement that it is useful to assess a child's physical growth, health, motor development, sensory capacity, speech and language development, and emergent self-regulation and self-care skills. These markers seem to be universally relevant and meaningful. Beyond this, we are assessing children against a normatively constructed set of indicators of what it takes to succeed in the world we want children to function in and contribute to, and this is inextricably tied to the dominant culture's values and goals. As children develop, we assess them to see if they are really going to be "our future." In Canada, this means: Will they finish formal education? Will they fit into a neoliberal world as contributors to a capitalist economy as workers, consumers, and commodities? Not all Indigenous families and communities share these aspirations for their children. As a result, for many, their children may be identified as "at risk" of early school failure. Yet they may be "at promise" to contribute to the particular cultural and social community whose future they can help to secure and to a decolonized world where heterogeneity is truly valued. We need to show that we value diversity, not only in our rhetoric, but in our everyday practices, including how we assess children's learning and development.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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