# Inclusive Education and Students of Aboriginal Ancestry
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For many Indigenous people, attending school in the public school system involves navigating two cultures. Navigating both worlds involves exploring the space where the two knowledges come together, often referred to as the third space (Marker, 2017). The North Vancouver School District is beginning to explore the third space with respect to inclusion and Indigenous students through this document. The term Indigenous will be used to recognize First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students from Canada, and First Peoples from other locations. The term Indigenous is used with the recognition that, while there is rich diversity in Indigenous worldview, language, and ways of knowing, there are common elements and common experiences among groups, including issues central to education (Dauphinais, Charley, Robinson-Zanartu, Melroe, & Baas, 2009; Preston & Claypool, 2013). An exploration of the meaning of inclusion for Indigenous people is one step towards Reconciliation, with the hope that increasing educator understanding of issues related to the topic will lead to more culturally responsive practices (Truth and Reconciliation Canada, 2015). Despite the British Columbia government committing to achieving parity in educational outcomes between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers by 2015 (Office of the Auditor General, 2015), Indigenous students continue to experience lower graduation rates and remain over-represented in several special needs categories. It is time to examine issues of inclusion with Indigenous students more closely, with the recognition that the following considerations are not prescriptive directions for practice.
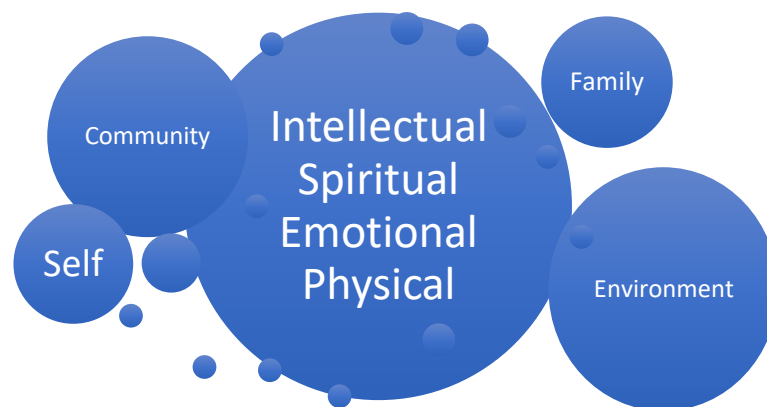
Traditional Learning

Traditional learning is holistic, beginning with the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical realms of the self, and extends to the family, community, and Nation (Burgess & Cavanaugh, 2012; Claypool & Preston, 2011; Madden, Higgins & Korteweg, 2013). Learning is cyclical in that it returns to the self through self-reflection. It is lifelong, experiential in nature, and rooted in language and culture (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). Storytelling was, and is, the basic foundation of learning (Iseke, 2013). Children learn how to think through the daily activities of the community, which means culture shapes cognition (Tsethlikai, 2011). The identity of the learner is connected to the community, the land, space, and time (Bennett, 2015).

For more information about holistic approaches to learning, refer to the First Peoples Principles of Learning. These principles were created by an advisory committee including Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, scholars, and educators to guide the development of curriculum that focuses on First Peoples' experiences, values, and beliefs authentically (Chrona, 2014). The principles detail First Peoples epistemology and pedagogy, and are a foundational element of the redesign of the British Columbia curriculum.

Importance of Community

Understanding the importance of community is central to working with Indigenous families. In traditional Indigenous communities, all members of the community care for others and each member is responsible to the group's collective wellness (Cheah & Chirkov, 2008). In particular, the care of children and Elders is a shared responsibility (Bevan-Brown, 2013). The extended family and community play a role in parenting and teaching cultural and moral values, with a focus on listening and observing. All members are included regardless of ability, as all children are gifts. This is illustrated through the following quote, in which an Elder talks about her sister, who was identified as having an intellectual disability when she attended a public school:

> *She was my older sister. She was never not an Elder to me. Even when I 'passed' her in school. She was always there for me, with me, and never-ending kind. This is the way she was seen and perceived by all of our contemporaries. She wasn't treated differently by our friends and family. She wasn't excluded or shunned. She was included in all things to best of her capabilities. If we did tasks, she had hers too, some the same as everyone, some less demanding. We talked, played and grew together, each to our own best potential, choices, likes, and dislikes (Nelson, 2017).*

The importance of community extends to the school and classroom community. In some cases, school practices may result in the perception of exclusion from the classroom community. The following quote describes a parent's reaction when her child, and a group of other students, were asked to finish their assignment in the hallway while the rest of the class moved on to the next activity:

> *There were about 10 kids out of the 32 kids that didn't finish, and he literally said, "You guys just go." Eight out of the ten kids he shooed out had designations. They were really being excluded (Nelson, 2017).*

In some cases, parents may feel their child is excluded from the school community. In the following example, the child was not allowed to play with other students at recess, and was only allowed to attend for half a day as a result of his behavior:

> *They would send him home often. When we first put him in school, I was at SFU and I was going to go full time again but I couldn't because they would only take him for a half day [even though] kindergarten was a full day. I had to quit school, I had to go on welfare. It was totally embarrassing (Nelson, 2017).*

This caregiver felt further excluded from the school community when she discovered that the school had not communicated that her son was not allowed to play with others at recess:

> *I didn't really know that was happening until my boy, one day when I was putting him to bed, he said, "Mom, today was my lucky day." I said, "Why was it your lucky day, my boy?" and he said, "Because they let me play outside at recess." (Nelson, 2017).*

Ethic of Non-interference

One important piece of community functioning is the ethic of non-interference. In traditional Indigenous communities, it is disrespectful to interfere with, or challenge others (Heilbron & Guttman, 2000). Coercion or meddling was not tolerated (Morrisette & Gadbois, 2006), with the understanding that the Spirit world would see to it that wrong-doers restore harm they caused (Simpson, 2016). This is relevant for educators, as directive professional services are inconsistent with this ethic (Nuttgens & Campbell, 2010). Educators often provide directive services, including intervention for academics, behavior, and social-emotional functioning. This may be provided in class, via pull-out, or through intervention activities sent home. When interacting with caregivers, this may occur when educators suggest caregivers implement interventions at home, access additional supports in the school, or access supports in the community. For some caregivers, especially in our more traditional families, direct confrontation may be seen as judgmental (Poonwassie & Charter, 2001).

As educators, we offer services to all students, as interventions are beneficial for academic improvement, but how are we taking other worldviews into consideration when working with families? In particular, how are we talking to parents, Indigenous or not, about the possibility of having their child go through the psychoeducational assessment process? The topic of assessment may come as a surprise, unless there is regular communication and collaboration with families throughout the lower tiers of support leading up to intensive supports such as assessment. Even with regular communication, if parents are not educators or do not have a thorough understanding of the North Vancouver School District Service Delivery Model, the topic of assessment may be surprising. Terminology used, such as psychoeducational assessment, designation, or disability may be confusing as any parent, Indigenous or not (Merkel, 2010). The following quotes illustrate caregiver confusion when the purpose of assessment is not clearly communicated:

> *You guys think my child is A, B, C, D…I got really upset when they presented that to me. I was thinking, is my child not up to par? (Nelson, 2017)*

> *I didn't understand what he was saying. He explained it in technical book terms. I shot him down right away. I need to learn more about that, I need to understand why you're trying to do that with my daughter (Nelson, 2017).*

Differences in Culture Between Home and School

While many groups straddle two cultures, for Indigenous people, the differences across the two worlds is vast, including differences in basic values, beliefs, ways of being with each other, and other cultural behaviors (Dauphinais, Charley, Robinson-Zañartu, Melroe, & Baas, 2009). There are also temporal differences, in that Indigenous knowledge, stories, and history are more related to place than to linear time. It may be difficult for students to switch between cultures when coming from home to school as there may be different expectations. The following illustrates this:

> *Aboriginal kids, depending on their at-home setting, school is super different, they don't know what the rules are and no one really tells you what the rules are of that place you're in. I find that transition really hard for them because they are used to being able to be one way, and then expected to be another way, and if they are special needs it's going to take them a bit longer to learn those things. [For one of my sons], it rears its head as a behavior problem. It's important for people to know, recognize it's not the disability, it's just not having the knowledge (Nelson, 2017).*

The following illustrates one parent's struggle with the differences between home and school culture:

> *Inside I struggle. I know my son needs both world, I know he does, he's going to need to survive in a modern system, like it or not, but I just don't want him to drop all of who he is just to get there. I want him to value who he is and I don't know how that, how it all intersects (Nelson, 2017).*

Language

Exploring the differences between Indigenous language and standard English is one way to gain a greater understanding of differences in worldview. Indigenous languages have less individual words, and the words and phrases used are more relational than English. For example, in the Státimcets language, terms related to 'basket' refer to the basket in relation to something or someone (First Voices, 2017). For example, the term qul ti tslá7a translates to 'the basket is full.' Another example is the greeting swat snúwa, which translates to 'who do you belong to.' It is not uncommon for Indigenous people to talk about which families they belong to, or who their grandmother is when meeting for the first time. This illustrates the worldview that Indigenous identity is related to family, community, and land (Bennett, 2015). Indigenous languages and English are so different; many constructs cannot be translated to English. For example, the Haida term sq'adada means both teaching and learning (Davidson, 2016).

Sliammon Elder, Elsie Paul, shared her traditional knowledge through storytelling in Sliammon, which was then translated to English (Paul, Raibmon, & Johnson, 2014). Not only are her stories a rich source of cultural and historical knowledge, the resource she created provides insight into the significant differences between Indigenous language and English. The following excerpt demonstrates the difference between the two languages and the challenge of translating between

the two. Please note, this example is missing the step that involves phonemic transcription, or the abstraction of the first line.

č'iy-i-t-an
hear-STV-CTR-1SG.ERG
that.I.heard.it
'It was crying and it was weird, I heard it coming from the bush'

The first line is a phonetic transcription of the Sliammon language as pronounced by Elder Elsie. The second line involves labelling segments identified during the phonemic transcription (as noted above, the phonemic transcription step is not illustrated). The third line is roughly a word for word translation. Finally, the fourth line is a free translation to English that corresponds to the phonetic and phonemic translations, and intends to reflect Sliammon phrasing. This translation illustrates how the single Sliammon term does not have an equivalent in English, it translates to two phrases, and it involves relationality. Individuals who think using Indigenous language are thinking with different constructs and worldview than people thinking in English.

An Indigenous speech-language pathologist who has spent a significant amount of time working with Indigenous populations, describes Aboriginal English dialect in the Canadian context (Peltier, 2011). Aboriginal English dialect is used in rural and urban communities by individuals who speak their traditional language and English, and by people who are monolingual in English. Aboriginal English dialect differs in: phonology, verb and noun endings, pronoun deletion, vocabulary use, sequencing, connecting between ideas, and use of silence.

Understanding the difference between Indigenous languages, Aboriginal English dialect, and English is important for assessment. Students who use Aboriginal English dialect exclusively, or who use Aboriginal English dialect and standard English but are not able to code switch efficiently, or have not learned standard English to a sufficient degree are disadvantaged in assessment. Understanding language differences is also important for understanding differences in worldview. Language and culture cannot be separated, and both shape the way we think, perceive the world, and interact with each other (Kawagley, 2002). Many of our students are forced to switch between worldviews when moving between home and school.

Construct of Disability

Disabilities are a western construct (Peweardy & Fitzpatrick, 2009). The construct of disability may not exist at all, or may exist differently for Indigenous communities (Mushquash & Bova, 2007). This departure in perspective is another illustration of the differences in worldview, and is important for educators to understand. In traditional Indigenous thought, learning is lifelong, and there is no timeframe for development (Bevan-Brown, 2013). That means the concept of intellectual disability is not relevant, as there no cut-points to meet given developmental milestones. For some communities, the inability to speak the group's traditional language is the definition of disability, because the ability to learn from Elders is limited (Bevan-Brown, 2001). For others, having minimal relationships signifies disability, because of the individual's limited integration in the community (Peweardy & Fitzpatrick, 2009).

For many communities, the construct does not exist at all – in most Indigenous languages there is no word to describe disability. As previously explored, all members are integral to the community in his or her own way, regardless of ability (Gerlach, 2008). The following quote illustrates the difference in worldview between one parent's community and her son's school. In their community, her son was identified as being a Backwards Spirit, which is a position of leadership:

> *We call them Windigo but their purpose is, yeah they are very challenging and very frustrating, you know, but they're our mirrors and they teach us that we don't always have to conform and we can do things differently, and they teach us leadership, and so, from an Indigenous perspective, from where we're from, he's a gift, and he's going to teach us so much, but from, like, a colonial, western perspective, like in the school system, he's frustrating, he's got ADHD, he's defiant, he's all of these things that we look at and we, we treasure, and we think this is special (Nelson, 2017).*

Ongoing Impact of Residential Schools

The last Residential School closed on 1996 (Legacy of Hope, 2012), which means many of the caregivers interacting with schools today attended Residential School. The impact of Residential Schools extends beyond impacting individuals who attended (Truth and Reconciliation, 2015), as direct and indirect effects of intergenerational trauma are operating at the individual, family, and community levels (Elias, Mignone, Hall, Hong, Hart, & Sareen, 2012). Many Survivors report an ongoing fear authority figures, mistrust of schools, and reduced ability to advocate for their children as a result of Residential School attendance (McBride & McKee, 2001; Nelson, 2017). ***Survivor perception of current schools may influence how caregivers interact with schools.*** Many caregivers have difficulty walking into schools because of the fear or mistrust they feel. The following quote is from a caregiver who experiences extreme mistrust for schools and experiences intense, physical symptoms of fear when she enters her son's school. While she did not attend Residential School herself, she attributes her fear of schools to growing up hearing the stories of family members and community members who did attend.

> *I wasn't in Residential School, but just talking with my family and other people (Nelson, 2017).*

In addition, Residential Schools may impact ***children's perception*** of current schools, as many have grown up aware of what happened to family members who attended. The following quote illustrates this:

> *Even if a person didn't go to Residential School, there can still be a lot of issues from Residential School. So, for that person to step foot into school can be very difficult. You have to be cognizant of that fact, and cognizant of the fact that, even for the little guys, because they'll have that level of untrust that you need to at least be aware of. It might not be obvious but it's certainly there (Nelson, 2017).*

Intergenerational trauma also impacts the wellness of Indigenous students in schools today. In families with intergenerational trauma, fear and mistrust can be transferred from parents to children (Bombay, Matheson, & Anison, 2011). Children may also develop other psychological symptoms of trauma experienced by their parents, even if they are not directly exposed to the trauma (Bellamy & Hardy, 2015). There is a higher prevalence of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Survivors (Bombay, Matheson, & Anison, 2009). Not only can this impact parenting, unresolved parental trauma is linked to increased vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and PTSD in the child (Bellamy & Hardy, 2015). The impact of Residential Schools may also impact the accuracy of our assessment practices. Difficulties experienced by children of Residential School families are identified as being related to, "learning, developmental, or psychiatric disabilities as opposed to being understood as intergenerational trauma," (Chapman, 2012, p.141). Finally, for youth who recognize the impact Residential Schools and other colonizing practices on our communities, the perception of historical loss, including loss of language, cultural practices, and access to traditional territory, may lead to emotional responses such as anger, avoidance, anxiety, and depression (Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004).

Racism of Low Expectations

In December 2015, the Auditor General reviewed Aboriginal Education programming across British Columbia (Office of the Auditor General, 2015). Her research team collected information from Indigenous students, Indigenous community members, school personnel, and district personnel. Based on the information collected, she coined the term *racism of low expectations* to describe what is happening in schools, province-wide. One of the issues is that many educators assume Indigenous students have disabilities, or are less capable than non-Indigenous students. This translates to students living on reserve being more likely to receive school leaving certificates, even if they do not have a designation of special needs. This also translates to Indigenous students, living on or off-reserve, being twice as likely than non-Indigenous students to complete course that limit their post-secondary options. The first of the following two quotes is from a parent who has experienced the racism of low expectations with her children. The second quote is by a school principal involved in the research conducted by the Auditor General.

> *Educators must understand that being Aboriginal and having special needs are not the same thing. Having both labels, it's like two strikes against you (Nelson, 2017).*

> *Teachers need to be willing and courageous enough to examine their own biases and expectations of Aboriginal learners. It's about the students knowing that the teachers they had in grades 1, 2, 5, etc…knew that they would be successful (Office of the Auditor General, 2015, p.38).*

Issues with Assessment and Indigenous Populations

It is important for educators to understand the perception of some parents regarding assessment of their children. Some parents perceive assessment as an attempt at assimilation, and some

perceive it as a measure of how assimilated their child is (Mushquash & Bova, 2007). The following quote illustrates this:

> *Look at the assessment, look at what it's asking my child. It's asking him, you know, reading, writing, memory, all of these kinds of things, and it's one cultural value system that's not his. So, it's like, how well are you assimilating? Hmm, not very well, hmm, yeah, yeah, not really working for you. We need to tweak you up a little bit, let's get you to do more of this and more of that and then you'll be more assimilated (Nelson, 2017).*

Given the ongoing impact of Residential Schools, the ongoing impact of the Sixties Scoop (organized removal of Indigenous children from their homes for placement in foster care), and the historic exclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing from the education system, it is not surprising that many Indigenous parents believe assessment is done for the purpose of placing Indigenous children into special programs, or to find a reason to place them in foster care (Nelson, 2017). The following quote describe one parent's experience having her child assessed:

> *They had no idea that I was in my third year at university, they had no idea about any of that, they automatically assumed because I'm Indigenous, that I was a certain way, that my son has FAS, that he needs to go into care, all of these things. I lived in fear literally for two years of my life, thinking that my son was going to be taken away even though I was a good parent (Nelson, 2017).*

In addition to parent perspective, there are other issues with the assessment of Indigenous students. There is bias at several stages of the psychoeducational assessment process (Early Childhood Measurement, 2011), beginning with differences in how teachers are referring Indigenous students for assessment compared to non-Indigenous students (Dolan, 1999; McBride & McKee, 2001). Differences in referral practices may indicate differing expectations or a lack of educator understanding of cultural differences. Regarding the measures used, there is a lack of normative data available for Indigenous groups in the widely used standardized cognitive and achievement assessments (Dingwall, Pinkerton, & Lindeman, 2013; Janzen, Salkoske & Das, 2013). Although Indigenous people may be included in samples, their results cannot be isolated, and Indigenous people may be underrepresented in the normative group.

With respect to responses during the test sessions, differences in conceptualization of space and time may impact performance on some tasks (Dingwall, Pinkerton, & Lindeman, 2013). In homes and communities that emphasize traditional child-rearing, children learn through modeling, which may not include the use of directive verbalization or writing (Early Childhood Measurement, 2011). Indigenous children may give less detailed responses because of a reluctance to 'take up space,' which is seen as disrespectful. They may be reluctant to respond when unsure, for fear of making a mistake in front of the assessor. They may have a holistic style of organizing information, which is counter to the highly categorized nature of standardized cognitive and achievement assessments. They may prefer a reflective style of processing, which could impact scores on timed tasks. Finally, they may prefer a collaborative approach to completing tasks, which is counter to the very individual approach taken during the

psychoeducational assessment process. As previously mentioned, issues with language may also impact assessment.

The use of tests based on the Wechsler scales have been a subject of debate for many years. Historically, Indigenous individuals perform less well on tests that use the Wechsler scales, especially items that are verbally loaded (Hildebrand & Salkoske, 1996). For example, performance on verbal scales was significantly lower than performance on performance scales on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Revised (Dolan, 1999), the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Third Edition, and the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, Revised (Kush & Watkins, 2007). More recently, Indigenous students were found to perform significantly, and consistently lower than Asian and Caucasian groups on the indicator of overall intelligence on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fifth Edition, which is called the Full Scale Intelligence Quotient (Babcock, 2017). While the results showed no evidence of test bias, the data was not able to explain the significant between-group differences based on ethnicity.

To what extent to we understand the perspective of the Skwxwú7mesh Nation, Tsleil-Waututh Nation, and Métis Nation with respect to the construct of special needs?

How are we, as educators, taking up these considerations in our current practice?

How can we, as educators, take up these considerations in future practice?

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