

## **Challenges with Psychoeducational Assessment in Response to Truth and Reconciliation**

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The Canadian Psychological Association's (CPA) Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada's Report was released in 2018. This document highlighted methods, practices, and biases that psychologists across the country have a responsibility to critically evaluate and change in order to provide ethically and culturally appropriate services for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit populations. For school psychologists working with Indigenous Peoples, perhaps no section of CPA's response to the TRC report is more convicting than the comments on psychological assessment.

Currently, formal psychoeducational assessments remain relevant for students living in First Nations communities. Indigenous Services Canada's High-Cost Special Education Program (HCSEP: Government of Canada, 2019) specifies that students must be identified by a psychoeducational assessment or a physician report in order to be identified with severe to profound exceptionalities and then receive an Individual Program Plan (IPP). However, as CAP (2018) outlines, psychological assessments have likely been culturally biased, viewed skeptically or rejected within First Nations communities, and have not valued Indigenous worldviews regarding health, pathology, and treatment but instead prioritized Western theories. One aspect of traditional psychoeducational assessment, a reliance on quantifying intelligence, may be one of the most challenging practices to rectify in this regard.

School psychology has been strongly linked to intelligence testing since its inception over 100 years ago (Merrell, Ervin, & Peacock, 2012). However, available intelligence tests are not normed on Indigenous Peoples, do not include their unique skills and knowledge, and may not clearly predict their future academic or vocational success as was their intended purpose (CPA, 2018; Geva & Wiener, 2014). As just one example, evidence suggests that Indigenous children may score lower on norm-referenced measures of verbal ability which often contributes heavily to the calculation of global intelligence scores. In contrast, these children may perform commensurate on scales measuring aspects of visual processing or fluid reasoning (Mushquash & Bova, 2007; Nakano & Watkins, 2013). Flanagan, Ortiz, and Alfonso (2013) have provided Culture-Language Test Classification Matrices that may support school psychologists in making assessment decisions that place greater weight on thinking skills, rather than acquired knowledge. Despite these known issues, high stakes decisions continue to be made based on intelligence testing results (e.g., diagnoses, educational placement, etc.). The challenge remains for school psychologists to decide on a case-by-case basis how they will use standardized assessment measures.

Pertinent examples of potential changes to Indigenous assessment practice include understanding intelligence in the individual's cultural context, focusing on strengths and gifts versus pathology and diagnosis, and learning more about the individual's role and knowledge within their community (CPA, 2018). Sternberg (1999) has suggested the importance of "successful intelligence" which may be conceptualized as the abilities that are required to succeed in specific environments and cultures. In this regard, Geva and Wiener (2014) offer some practical suggestions that may be considered for intelligence testing within these unique environments and cultures:

- Consider if intelligence testing is truly required or timely.

- If intelligence testing cannot be avoided, take ample time developing rapport. Assess intelligence after other domains (e.g., oral-language proficiency, academics, etc.).
- Select appropriate measures in advance (e.g., nonverbal intelligence measures). Focus on fluid versus crystallized skills, selecting subtests, composites, or full measures based on degree of cultural and linguistic loading.
- Gather information on adaptive behaviour relevant to the community. Available rating scales may be inappropriate.
- Consider how the child solves problems that are relevant to them, in their community.
- Use dynamic, cross battery assessment approaches (e.g., providing cues such as clarifying instructions, additional sample or practice items, teaching strategies, etc.) to examine learning and problem-solving skills (see Geva & Wiener, 2014, pg. 115-134).

School psychologists often find themselves weighing the potential risks and benefits of assessment outcomes, considering the individual, family, community, and systems levels. They may face system-level tensions whereby they are encouraged to present information (e.g., intelligence scores) in traditional formats based on established program eligibility and criteria without accommodation for culturally and linguistically diverse practice recommendations. Within this context, a crucial role of school psychologists is to engage in advocacy. We should assist systems in understanding the limitations and risks of potentially unfair assessment practices and advocate for equitable approaches to assessment that provide examinees a fair chance to achieve the same level as others with equal ability. Our response to the TRC report can be one of engaging with First Nations communities in a more collaborative approach to assessment, while also advocating for higher level change in how these assessments are interpreted and required.

References available upon request.

