

# Addressing Indigenous Children's Language Development & Assessment

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There is mounting evidence to support the notion that oral language and early literacy development are vital to school readiness and academic success (Mackay & McIntosh, 2012; Miller, Webster, Knight, & Comino, 2014). Standard language assessment tools are frequently employed to assess speech and language development in early childhood. However, there is growing concern amongst parents, practitioners, and researchers alike that standard language assessments do not accurately reflect the language development of Indigenous children, and in fact can have detrimental effects on their development (Ball, 2007; Dender & Stagnitti, 2011; Gould, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013). At present there are no appropriate assessment tools that capture the unique and distinct needs of Indigenous children in Canada and elsewhere (Ball, 2007). While literature in the area of Indigenous children's language development is limited, research continues to emerge on the urgent necessity to employ "culturally safe" and "culturally relevant" assessment practices for Indigenous children, which bear in mind situated historical, socio-economic, geographic, and political conditions (Ball, 2007; Westby & Inglebret, 2012).

## **Issue and Significance**

In Canada, considerable gaps exist in overall education outcomes for Indigenous children versus "non-Indigenous" children (Ball, 2007; White, Maxim, & Spence, 2004; McIntosh et al., 2011). In an effort to change outcomes for Indigenous children, and as the importance of the early years is increasingly recognized, there are numerous calls across Canada to make

Indigenous children a national priority. This would involve governmental and societal support for Indigenous early childhood development and Indigenous education (Ball, 2007; Greenwood, 2006; McKeough et al., 2008). Of particular concern is the role that Standard English language assessments play in constructing and shaping perceptions of Indigenous children's language development. Numerous scholars and educational professionals note that Indigenous children are being misdiagnosed or over-diagnosed with language impairment issues and developmental delays (Ball, 2007; Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Fadden & LaFrance, 2010; Peltier, 2010). A significant reason for these conditions is that Standard English language assessments are created by, and largely implemented by Standard English language speakers. This directly impacts non-standard English language speakers, as other dialects and language forms, such as Aboriginal English (AE), are not recognized in these assessments (Gould, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013; Peltier, 2010). Researchers also importantly note that standard assessment tools and methods are ethnocentric in nature, in that they are premised on Western epistemologies, learning methods, and communication styles (Gould, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013; Peltier, 2010). For children who are representative of diverse linguistic and cultural groups, the possibility for prejudice "is inherent in the use of standardized tests" (Pearce & Williams, 2013, p.430). An accurate assessment of language ability and development requires speech and language pathologists (SLPs) and other professionals to understand and identify dialectal differences, or such differences may be

misinterpreted as language impairments or delays. In turn, children may not gain access to the necessary and appropriate services they require for healthy language development (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013).

There is a lack of Indigenous speech and language pathologists to develop and deliver “culturally safe” and appropriate services to Indigenous children and their communities (Gould, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013; Westby & Inglebret, 2012). Further to this, many of the SLPs who are working with Indigenous children in Canada and elsewhere have not received the essential training they require to provide “culturally competent” services to Indigenous children (Bernhardt, et al., 2011; Gould, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013). If SLPs have no familiarity or knowledge of Indigenous English dialectical forms, this can disadvantage children, as cultural and linguistic understandings are not shared during assessment practices (Gould, 2008).

In Canada, as in other countries, Indigenous children disproportionately suffer from auditory health issues, such as otitis media (Ball, 2007; Bernhardt et al., 2011; Pearce & Williams, 2013). The prevalence of this and other auditory health conditions, such as hearing difficulties, hearing loss, and poor ear health, can negatively affect children's language development (Bernhardt et al., 2011; Bowd, 2005; Gould, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013; Peltier, 2010; Thomson, 1994; Westby & Inglebret, 2012). It is therefore important to consider the potential impact of auditory health conditions on language development.

### **Research Recommendations for Indigenous Language Assessment Practices**

Based on the conditions addressed above, researchers, practitioners and community members have made numerous recommendations to create relevant strategies and interventions that support Indigenous children's language and early literacy development.

### ***Consider Indigenous Ways of Communicating and Participating***

To develop appropriate language assessment methods and tools, researchers call for further examination of current language assessment practices for Indigenous children. This involves recognizing the explicit relationship between language and culture, and how Indigenous children may communicate and participate in ways that differ from “non-Indigenous children” (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). As Gould (2008) argues, “no matter what the assessment task may look like on the surface, if the administration of the test or assessment follows non-Aboriginal ways of communicating, it [the assessment] will continue to be problematic” (Gould, 2008, p.646). For instance, researchers highlight the cultural understanding of “shame” as a variable in standard assessment contexts, wherein children may feel apprehension to communicate in a situation where they do not know the rules or do not feel confident (Gould, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013; Westby & Inglebret, 2012). Scholars also note the tendency for Indigenous children to be silent as a sign of respect for others or to take time to reflect before responding to questions. These ways of communicating may be falsely interpreted by non-Aboriginal SLPs and educators as a lack of understanding or engagement (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Gould, 2008; Neha, 2003). Ball & Bernhardt (2008) write that, “certain questioning routines that are common in mainstream, especially middle-class, Canadian society are not shared by some Native North American cultures” (p. 581). Several researchers recommend using ‘play-based’ or ‘language-in-action’ assessment activities (Gould, 2008; Westby & Inglebret, 2012) as Indigenous children tend to respond best to play-based tasks during a language assessment, which unlike a Question & Answer format, can allow for assessment to take place within familiar and more culturally appropriate activities. As such, SLPs and other professionals working with Indigenous children must have linguistic and cultural knowledge before engaging in assessment, and assessment tasks should be appropriate to cultural communication practices.

### ***Consider First Nation's English Dialects and Language Structures***

Currently there is very limited research on or understanding of Aboriginal English grammar structures and communication norms, although scholars are noting some distinctions between Aboriginal English and Standard English language forms. These distinctions are important as structural and communicative differences may be falsely interpreted and assessed as language deficiencies or impairments. As such, further research and analysis of Aboriginal English grammar structures and language usage is necessary to prevent Indigenous children from being disadvantaged by standardized assessments, and to develop more appropriate practices (Fadden & LaFrance, 2010; Pearce & Williams, 2013). For instance, in their study of Indigenous Australian children and standardized assessment performances, Pearce & Williams (2013) found that, when assessment results were recalculated for Aboriginal English (AE) grammatical features, both assessment scores and teacher scores of student ability increased. They recommend that standard assessments with Indigenous children "should be avoided", but if necessary, a "flexible scoring criteria" be implemented to address differences in dialect (p. 437).

Within the Canadian context, several scholars call for the official recognition and research of Aboriginal English and First Nations dialectical forms (Ball, 2007; Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2006; Fadden & LaFrance, 2010; Peltier, 2010). Based on their preliminary work on First Nations English dialects, Ball & Bernhardt (2008) suggest that "it seems likely that future research will confirm that First Nations English dialects are distinct from standard Canadian English in terms of their phonology, morphosyntax, and lexicon" (p. 580). They recommend further research using decolonizing methods to explore language in naturally occurring conditions, and they urge that research be conducted within a collaborative framework, wherein researchers and SLPs are working in partnership with First Nations communities.

### ***Contextualize Indigenous Children's Lives by Supporting Community-based Programs***

It is essential to contextualize the conditions in which Indigenous children live in Canada, as situated within historical and ongoing colonization that shapes the 'choices' and outcomes for Indigenous children and their families (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, & Rowan, 2014). Indigenous children's language development, including their access to support services, must be examined within multiple geographic, socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic contexts to greater inform the development of suitable approaches and interventions for children (Pearce & Williams, 2013). For instance, access to necessary services, including specialists such as SLPs, is particularly problematic for children who reside in remote and isolated communities (Ball, 2007; Greenwood, 2006; Preston, 2008). As such, to facilitate the healthy language development of Aboriginal children, priority must be placed on early identification and follow up support services. This involves support for community-based programs and services that deliver early interventions for children, and training and capacity building for frontline staff (Ball, 2007).

### ***Prioritize SLP Training to Develop 'Culturally Safe' Assessments***

Educators and researchers call for the recruitment, responsible training, support and retention of Indigenous SLPs to assist in the development and facilitation of 'culturally safe' language assessment approaches and tools. Moreover, specific training is needed for non-Indigenous SLPs to develop their understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching and learning, as well as to gain familiarity with the qualities of Indigenous languages and language use (Bernhardt et al., 2011; Gould, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013, Westby & Inglebret, 2012). Without knowledge of dialectical features and cultural communication styles, Standard English speaking assessors may incorrectly interpret the speech and language of Indigenous children (Gould, 2008). To address this concern, the School of Audiology and Speech Services (SASS) at the University of British Columbia has

developed a course on speech-language pathology in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities (see Bernhardt et al., 2011).

### ***Collaborate with Indigenous Communities to Integrate Indigenous Approaches to Child Development***

Development and support for Indigenous children's language development must be premised on the recognition of Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous approaches to early childhood development. As Gould (2008) states: "Indigenous peoples have been successfully formally educating their children for thousands of years. Non-Indigenous SLPs need to acknowledge the educational successes of Indigenous communities and turn to Indigenous people for guidance and expertise in their work with Indigenous children" (p. 655). To create new approaches to language development and early literacies for Indigenous children, further research and initiatives must be based on the cultivation of relationships, and be developed through collaborative work with Indigenous parents, communities and professionals (Ball, 2007; Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013; Peltier, 2010).

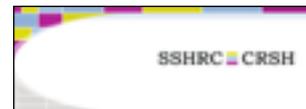
### **Conclusion**

There are calls for a national Canadian strategy to support Indigenous children's language and literacy development (Ball, 2007). As Indigenous peoples are the fastest growing and youngest segment of the Canadian population, these calls are timely (e.g., Statistics Canada, 2006, 2013; Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003). Further inquiry into Indigenous children's language development that respects the diversity and objectives of Indigenous communities is necessary to ensure overall holistic development and wellness for future generations (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Peltier, 2010). This begins with the collaborative development of culturally safe and appropriate language assessment tools and practices, which accurately reflect the distinct and varied linguistic and cultural realities of Indigenous children in this country.

### **Author Biography**

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