



Centre of  
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Needs

# ASSESSING WITHOUT LABELS: INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

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## **Abstract**

This paper will explore the place of assessment in a culturally defined paradigm of inclusive education. Given the global trend towards inclusive classrooms, defined by a social justice view of learner diversity, the diagnostic/prescriptive medical view of special education has become antiquated. What has emerged is a growing preference towards empowering the classroom teacher with the knowledge and skills to identify the authentic needs of students and to differentiate instruction to respond to those needs. In a contemporary Canadian society characterized by shifting demographics, and increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, this perspective holds particular relevance. The territory of Nunavut, as example, is passionately committed to establishing a broader view of diversity and creating a system in which children celebrate difference. This paper explores the wealth of literature on the issue and establishes a Canadian context to present Nunavut's model as being exemplary within this global debate.

## **Inclusive education in the Canadian context**

The history of accommodating the needs of diverse learners in contemporary educational settings parallels the evolution of social, anthropological and psychological systems of our time (Kauffman, 1981). Smith, Polloway, Patton, and Dowdy (1998) summarize this history as having moved through three distinct phases: segregation, integration, and inclusion. In fact, so strong is the current philosophy of inclusion that the literature on perspectives of student diversity is dominated by criticisms of special education and the benefits (and challenges) of inclusion. Timmons (2002) explores an international perspective on the popularity and growth of inclusive education and supports Kaufman's view that this paradigm shift mirrors societal transformations which were calling for a celebration of diversity. Booth and Ainscow (2002) see it as society's attempts to ready children to live in inclusive communities which embrace all marginalized groups. Skrtic (1995) shares this perspective and feels that such a shift is anchored more in a strengthened recognition of civil liberties and human rights than a mere tolerance of difference. Whatever the rationale, a global shift in thinking on methods schools use in responding to the needs of diverse learners has occurred. Nowhere is this more evident than in this country, where "inclusive education is an issue within the context of Canadian society, not just within the context of Canadian schools...In Canada, if we choose to teach, we are choosing to teach in inclusive settings" (Hutchinson, 2007. p.xxv).

### Shifting paradigms of care

Smith et al. (1998) suggests that special education found its origin in society's concern with human rights in the years following World War II, and that by the 1950's educational placement based upon minority and/or disability status was a hotly debated issue. Interestingly, special education owes much of its origin to society's embracing of cultural diversity when the desegregation of American schools validated a parallel human rights argument against segregation based on physical/mental ability (Friend et al., 1998). Driedger (1989) refers to this as "the last civil rights movement", one in which parents and citizens effectively lobbied for stronger supports for exceptional individuals by calling for a paradigm shift in how we view disabilities.

*One Million Children*, the final report of the Commission on Emotional and Learning Disorders in Children (Roberts & Lazure, 1970), provided a major review of services for exceptional children in Canada and helped solidify the acceptance of these children in neighborhood schools. The report called for increased integration and improved programming based on individual rather than group needs (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Smith, Polloway, Patton, Dowdy, & Heath, 2001).

While both Canada and the United States gave responsibility to the regions (provinces and states) for drafting policy and implementing educational legislation, *United States Public Law 94-142: The Education for All Children Act (1975)* ushered in a more inclusive model of special education by calling for a free and appropriate education for all children in the least restrictive and a non-

discriminatory environment. To facilitate this, a model which depicted a "cascade" (continuum) of delivery service options was developed. Written individual educational plans (IEPs) to target individual needs were designed and implemented as pragmatic support within this cascade of services (Salend, 2001). In Canada, indirect federal support for greater inclusion of diverse learners came from the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which challenged discrimination based on mental or physical disability. By the 1980's most provinces and territories were providing some type of special education through a combination of regular and individualized environments (Weber, 1994; Dworet & Bennet, 2002).

While special education had attained a foothold in community schools by the early 1980's, few of those who lobbied for such models could have predicted the sweeping changes that the ensuing years would bring. The release of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983) resulted in the school reform movement that has since dominated the educational agenda and forever altered the paradigm of special education. The reform movement heralded sweeping changes in the structure and delivery of education. It called for a focus on higher standards, enhanced curriculum, a shift towards site-based management and a review of special education (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Kauffman, 2000; Salend, 2001).

#### Criticisms of a deficit-based model

The impact of this movement on special education was immediate and dramatic (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Kauffman, 2000; Salend, 2001). Hockenbury,

Kauffman, and Hallahan (2000) summarize the ensuing criticisms of special education and conclude that it is a system that stigmatizes children with a medical label that results in marginalized placement in a completely separate educational system. Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) add to this by questioning the research base upon which special education practices were built. Skrtic (1995) calls for a radically different view of diversity, arguing that special education is anchored in “a theory of human pathology and organizational rationality”. The model, he posits, is based on a behavioral approach to diagnosing difference in order to rationalize a hierarchical system of fixed knowledge which renders the student is a passive recipient of scientific interventions. He questions why we have to label a child in order to qualify for services, all the while knowing the marginalizing impact that such labeling will have. Lipsky & Gartner (1997, 1998) support this criticism of a deficit model and call for an approach that responds to displayed need versus the prescribed label.

Danforth (1999) also questions this subordinate system of education, especially its reliance on medical language to describe students and validate professional expertise. He cites Rorty (1991) in discussing the use of language in this professionalized model: Rorty refers to the use of medical language as a *validation trap* to which professionals only have access, thereby limiting parental involvement. This criticism of a deficit model echoes Foucault’s (1977) discussion of the social construct of disability, where “via observation and normalising judgments and examinations” (p.195) subjects are individualized and thereby stigmatized as disabled. Foucault also argues that the process of focusing on

students' deficits through assessment creates a diagnostic/ prescriptive model that rationalizes stigmatization and discrimination. Allan (1996) theorizes that the resultant power that professionals gather further marginalizes students and families.

What emerges from this debate is a call to remove the language/label barrier that focuses on weakness and to promote democracy in educational practice. Danforth (1999) recommends four essential steps in this process:

1. Switch from a focus on "equal opportunities" to one of social justice that provides opportunities for dignity-enhancing and empowerment.
2. Demystify the power of the professional in the decision-making process.
3. Focus on pragmatic details of what actually works in classrooms.
4. Acknowledge the complexities of the struggle.

#### A socio-cultural articulation of inclusion

Central to a democratic school system is inclusion, a philosophy of community development and educational programming which strives to create communities that embrace all differences (Stainback & Stainback, 1992; Thomas, 1997; Smith, 1998; Sands, Kozleski & French, 2000). Support for this broader view of diversity has come from groups including the World Health Organization (1980) and the United Nations (1989), and has been articulated in UNESCO world conferences (1990 and 1994). Bloom, Perlmutter, and Burrell (1999) define inclusion as "a philosophy that brings students, families, educators, and community members together to create schools and other social institutions based on acceptance, belonging, and community" (as cited in Salend, 2001, P.



5). Sergioivanni (1994) references inclusion as community building, in which values of diversity reflect the social fabric of the community. Noddings (1992) endorses this view of diversity, stressing that schools have a responsibility to promote an “ethic of caring” in communities via positive classroom experiences for children. Stainback and Stainback (1992) state “when schools include all students, then equality is respected and promoted as a value in society.

Whereas, when schools exclude some students, prejudice is entrenched in the consciousness of many students when they become adults, with the results of increased social conflict and dehumanizing competition” (p.8). Banks et al.

(2005) comment:

the ideas of culturally responsive classrooms and inclusive classrooms are not entirely the same, but they are similar. Specifically, both terms suggest that schools and teachers need to develop classrooms that are supportive of children and accepting of difference. Within both of these conceptions, children’s strengths are emphasized and differences are considered a positive part of a learning environment because they allow children to share and experience diverse perspectives. In the past... special education was associated primarily with a deficit orientation (p.255).

Lupart (1999) offers a Canadian context to inclusion and raises particular concern for the separate funding mechanisms that a deficit model creates, where, in order to qualify for funding supports, labels are ascribed to children. While Lupart cites Alberta’s increasing number of students who have had a diagnosis in the last 20 years, Philpott and Dibbon (2007) raise a similar concern for increased diagnosis, even within a decreasing population in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). Lupart states, “Paradoxically, these trends are in direct contradiction to the prevailing societal, and for the most part, educationally,

accepted ideological stance of inclusion” (p.8). This indicates the contradictions of many school systems who, in an attempt to control funding, are seen as espousing the ideology and language of inclusion yet holding to a medical view of disability. Lupart cites The National Commission on the Future of Teaching in America (1996) in challenging this archaic perspective of bureaucratic management. “Today’s schools are organized in ways that support neither students nor teaching well. Like the turn-of-the-century industries they were molded after – most of which are now redesigning themselves – current structures were designed to mimic factories that used semi-skilled workers to do discrete pieces of work in a mass production assembly line” (p.45). Lupart’s comments on contemporary practice is reflective of Skrtic’s (1995) analogy of “machine bureaucracies”.

Nonetheless, while bureaucracy and philosophy continue to struggle for balance in today’s school, the perspective of promoting inclusive schools in inclusive communities has found an anchor in a paradigm of social justice. Touraine (1981) views such as being “...the expression of the collective will...as agents of liberty, equality, social justice, moral independence...” (as cited in Cooper, 1999, P. 29). In recent years, researchers such as Gale (2000), Gale and Densmore (2000), and Slee (2001) expand upon the notion of inclusion as an issue of liberation and social justice. While Gale argues that all aspects of social justice have relevance to inclusive education, recognitive justice is most relevant since it refers to the inherent worth that members have within social orders. Gale cites Young (1990) as stating, “recognitive justice moves beyond

an approach to social justice that gives primacy to having, to one that gives primacy to doing" (P. 260). Gale stresses that recognitive social justice approaches do more than permit participation in decision-making; they add value to "the process that takes account of the interests of all participants" (p. 264). Gale and Densmore (2000) believe that, as people begin to see their own strengths and view themselves in positive ways, they will assume greater control over their destinies. For those engaged in empowering disenfranchised populations and oppressed cultures such a model of schooling holds added value.

Varga-Toth (2006), in exploring the challenges facing disenfranchised learners in rural and northern contexts, voices concern for the community's capacity to respond. In a summary report, she cites the work of *The Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs* (Lakehead University) as embracing a broader interpretation of diverse needs to include "at risk" factors stemming from concerns in health, social/community issues, and disability. Levin (2004) states, "A student *at risk* is one whose past or present characteristics are associated with a higher probability of failing to attain desired life outcomes" (P.6). Levin, like others, supports this call for a broader interpretation of learner diversity by moving away from labels designed to categorize funding. He cites Wotherspoon and Schissel (2003) in explaining that *at risk* is a concept that "has expanded from one based on presumptions of deficit in the learner (a medical or psychological model) to encompass sensitivity to the educational, home/community environments of children's and youth's

development (a sociological model)” (P.323). Wotherspoon uses the history of aboriginal and indigenous education in Canada to illustrate the impact of a deficit-based model on a people’s identity:

Schooling has contributed to the subjugation and marginalization of aboriginal people but is regarded as a critical agency for their future social, economic and political success... The realities and struggles associated with aboriginal self-determination, in conjunction with aboriginal people’s participation in broader societal contexts, demonstrate how exclusionary processes operate in the absence of “inclusive spaces.” (Retrieved from the World Wide Web, March 1, 2007. <http://www.ccsd.ca/subsites/inclusion/bp/tw.htm>).

### **Indigenous education in the inclusive context**

The above argument is powerful in that Canada’s aboriginal and indigenous population can well appreciate the effects of being socially marginalized and labeled as different in a bureaucratic system of education. Today, the indicators for aboriginal people in Canada are stark. The gap in life expectancy between aboriginals and other Canadians is a staggering seven years. Aboriginal youth have a suicide rate eight times the national average, and a rate of incarceration five to six times that of the national average. Sixty-two percent of aboriginal youth smoke (compared with a national average of 24%) and 48% of aboriginal youth report drug use as being an issue (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs [DIAND], 2004a). The Council of Ministers of Education (2004). likewise reported:

There is recognition in all educational jurisdictions that the achievement rates of aboriginal children, including the completion of secondary school, must be improved. Studies have shown that some of the factors contributing to this low level of academic achievement are that aboriginals in Canada have the lowest income and thus the highest rates of poverty,

the highest rate of drop-outs from formal education, and the lowest health indicators of any group (P.22).

More alarming is the recognition that this situation is not improving, leading The Office of the Auditor General (2004) to report: "We remain concerned that a significant education gap exists between First Nations people living on reserves and the Canadian population as a whole, and that the timeframe estimated to close this gap has increased slightly from about 27 to 28 years" (Sect.,5.2). Statistics such as these are stark reminders of the consequences of society's view of difference as weakness.

Given Canada's shifting demographic base and a trend towards greater cultural diversity, these concerns become more significant. The 2001 census reported over 100 languages are spoken in this country; Statistics Canada (2005) reports that "Roughly one out of every five people in Canada, or between 19% and 23% of the nation's population, could be a member of a visible minority by 2017 " (P.6). More recently, Statistics Canada (2007) reports that two-thirds of the country's population growth comes from immigration. The 2001 census revealed that 1 million people identified themselves as aboriginal while 1.3 million reported having some aboriginal ancestry. This represents a sevenfold increase in the aboriginal population in the last 50 years while the non-aboriginal population has only doubled. Furthermore, this growth will continue at an annual rate of 1.8%, more than twice that for the general population. More pertinent to the field of education is the age of this population, "...projections show that the median age of the visible minority population would be an estimated 35.5 in

2017...in contrast, the median age of the rest of the population would be 43.4" (Statistics Canada, 2005, P.7). Inclusive education may have evolved from shifting paradigms of childhood disability, but in Canada at least, inclusion is quickly becoming an issue of cultural and linguistic diversity.

### A parallel history of aboriginal education

In light of such clear trends, especially among the school-aged population, understanding the history of failure for aboriginal youth becomes essential. Of particular pertinence to this paper is the realization that this history parallels that of special education – as also moving through distinct phases of segregation, integration, and inclusion. Burnaby & Philpott (2006) report “aboriginal people have been more strongly marked as *the other* from Western Canadian perspective than any other group” (P.8). This treatment as *other* was reflected in the 1867 *British North America Act* and the 1876 *Indian Act* that assigned responsibility for education of aboriginal and indigenous children to the federal government, despite individual provinces having exclusive responsibility for educating all other children (Nesbit, Philpott, Cahill & Jeffery, 2004, P.1). Ensuing educational initiatives such as church-run schools, missionary-led education and the now infamous residential schools not only failed to educate aboriginal children but quickly become instruments of “cultural genocide” (Burns, 1995, P.54). A subsequent 1969 Government of Canada document *The White Paper* attempted to address this failure by suggesting greater educational integration with the provinces (Goddard, 1993). Brooks (1991), in reflecting on this

document, referenced its lack of sensitivity to native language and culture. He outlines that “very little was done to accommodate Indian cultural differences in the integrated schools” (P. 173) and that the use of native language continued to be discouraged.

In response, the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) released a paper titled *Indian Control of Indian Education* which called for control of education by local bands. Nesbit et al. (2004) comment: “The paper represented a major First Nations initiative to reclaim control over aboriginal education and a philosophic departure from the existing federal association between education and cultural assimilation” (P.3). This move was viewed as an important step, yet the gap between stated promise and the educational reality for these children continued to raise concern (Canadian Education Association, 1984).

Surfacing amidst this debate was apprehension for the needs of diverse learners within aboriginal communities. Hurton (2002) in a national review of special education policy in First Nations schools, found that while Canadian provincial practices paralleled international trends, practice in native schools was much more fragmented and uneven. He documented a noticeable lack of articulation of either vision or policy for student support services in First Nations schools. Such concern was voiced by a Minister's Working Group on Education for aboriginal students which concluded that "All First Nations children have the right to be educated in their community school, integrated with their peers in a regular classroom, that is, in as normalized and as least restrictive a classroom

environment as is possible" (DIAND, 1998. P.22). The report went on to recommend:

A First Nations education system grounded in the wisdom of indigenous knowledge, that respects the vision of parents and elders and reinforces the teaching of language and culture will measure its success through the development of caring and respectful people who are valued contributors to their communities and live in harmony with their environment (P. 9).

This support for an inclusive model of education in native communities and caution against continued deficit models based on labeled differences is widespread (Goulet, 2001; Pewewardy, 2002; O'Donoghue, 2001). Philpott et al. (2004b), in discussing a cultural perspective on inclusive education, argue:

In looking to First Nations culture to contextualize and validate inclusive education, a number of community attributes lend support to a goodness-of-fit between the two. Clearly, inclusive education has as one of its core philosophical underpinnings a sense of community belonging and celebration of individual differences. While such is defended and proclaimed globally within a recognitive interpretation of social justice, aboriginal people see it as inherent to their existence. Instead of viewing differences as something to be tolerated and accepted, aboriginal cultures see differences as essential to the group's survival and as such are to be celebrated (P.63).

The perspective that individual difference is important to group survival is central to native faith, which affirms that all things and all people should be respected for their inherent value and worth. Ross (1992) argues that this perspective stems from core cultural values and gives rise to "a kind of mandatory egalitarianism, not only in terms of possessions but in all other respects as well, including criticism, praise, advice-giving, censure...." (P. 39). Ross sees community elders as being pivotal to this perspective of embracing difference. He states: "The primary duty of each generation was to prepare the



next for its turn on the path, to see the baton successfully transferred and to ensure that the journey was as sustaining for them as it had been for their predecessors" (P. 126). Philpott et al. (2004a) cite a Nunavut elder in expressing their role in education: "Our role is not to help identify weaknesses but rather help show children their strengths, their individual gifts, and then show them how to use these gifts to help the community" (C. Lee, personal communication, June 11, 2003).

#### Nunavut: culturally defined inclusive education

Nunavut holds particular relevance to a discussion on culturally defined inclusive education. Following release of *The White Paper* and *Indian Control of Indian Education* the responsibility for teaching Inuit children had become the responsibility of the government of the Northwest Territories. Teaching English was a priority when the schools were under federal control; under territorial jurisdiction, however, aboriginal languages were taught whenever possible and more cultural content was introduced into the curriculum. This growing recognition of the legitimacy and importance of Inuit culture and language resulted in negotiation with the federal government that culminated in the 1993 *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* effectively granting the Inuit the right of self-determination. In 1999, the formation of Nunavut as an autonomous territory in Canada finally assigned responsibility for education to the Inuit people (O'Donoghue, 2001).

Today, Nunavut has a population of just over 29 000, half of whom are school-aged children. With the highest fertility rate in Canada, there is little

surprise that Nunavut has a population growth of 10.2% in the past five years (Statistics Canada, 2007). The territory is characterized by four official languages, three time zones and a harsh geography. Nunavut extends along the north central and northeastern part of Canada, from above the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel to the North Pole. Three school districts operate 42 schools for 9 129 students, 8 762 of whom are listed as being Inuk (Department of Education, Curriculum & School Services, 2005). The territory boasts wide use of first language instruction in primary schools. English is introduced during the elementary grades as a transition towards intermediate and senior high school, which are taught exclusively in English. In 2004, 573 teachers were Inuit - the majority of whom worked in primary/elementary schools, of whom 61% were certified teachers (Aarluk Consulting Inc, 2005).

An examination of how learner diversity is facilitated gives rise to the emergence of a remarkable model that focuses on empowering the classroom teacher with the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of all children. Local schools have “Student Support Teachers” to assist with adapting instruction for individual need and each of the three regions has “Student Support Consultants” who work on an itinerant basis. These specialists work collaboratively with the classroom teachers, bringing various degrees of specialized training in learner diversity. Most regions do not have educational psychologists, speech language pathologists or occupational therapists, although such services can be contracted from private practitioners in other provinces. The regions are striving towards having school/community counselors available in each community, and those

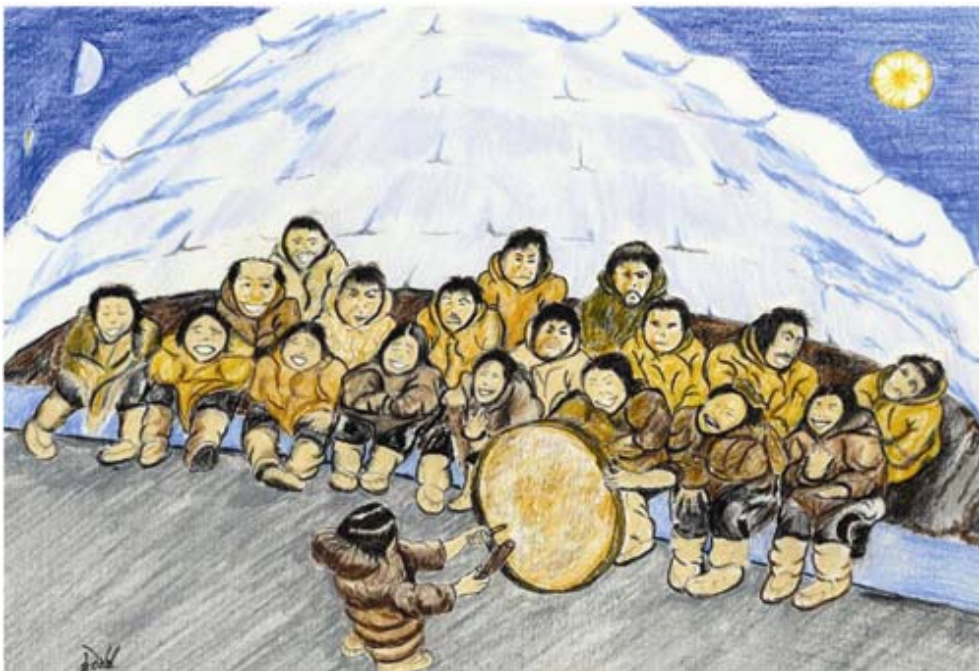
that are in place have a variety of training in the field (Leigh Anne Willard, personal communication. March 20, 2007).

With a mandate to create a fully bilingual society, the government has outlined four main goals: the establishment of healthy communities; simplicity and unity; self-reliance; and continued learning (The Bathurst Mandate, 1999). In short order, the territory has established a model of support anchored in culture and reflective of diversity. *Bill 1: Education Act* recognizes that “learning is based on and flows from a foundation of culture, tradition, heritage and language...” (Department of Education, Curriculum & School Service, 2002, P.iii). Subsequently, the school system in Nunavut has a vision, a plan, and a mandate to establish curriculum that will solidify culture and education while meeting the needs of all children. In doing so, the Nunavut schools act references *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit*, the world-view of Inuit culture, as being the foundation of education in Nunavut. A 1999 Council of Nunavut Elders explain this as including:

- The long-practiced tradition of passing Inuit knowledge, values and teachings from elders to the younger generations,
- Inuit knowledge in all areas of life,
- A system of laws, values and consultations before making important decisions that affect the community (Department of Education, Curriculum & School Service, 2002. P.9).

These values, presented in art and named in each of the four official languages, serve as the foundation of an inclusive approach to education. Such presentation not only reflects the oral tradition of Inuit language but also reflects the sensitivity to core cultural values.

Nunavut defines inclusion as being “an attitude and a belief. It is a way of life, a way of living and working together, based on the belief that each individual is valued and does belong” (Department of Education, Curriculum & School Service, 2002. P.10). That document goes on to explain that “critical to the concept of inclusion is the fact that student support is for all students and not just for those commonly referred to as having special needs. All students may require some form of support at some time in their education” (P.10). Like the core cultural principles of *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit*, this philosophy of inclusion has also been illustrated in art (Figure 1).



The elders have captured this in the image of a drum dance to portray the student and the supports required. In a drum dance (*the qaggi*), the dancer (*mumiqtuq*), represents the child requiring support. The row of people sitting next to the dancer holds the singers (*tuqariat*). These singers represent supports in the school, community and family that help the child learn. These also represent people, resource equipment, and itinerant specialist or [community health] personnel. These supports

respond to the changing needs of the child. Behind the *tuqariat* are the men who observe the dancer (*qaggipajut*). They represent other children in the classroom, other teachers, community members, older students who all contribute to the caring environment. It is a nurturing community – there to assist and celebrate the child for what he or she can do, giving voice to his or her song (Department of Education, Curriculum & School Service, 2002. P. 38)

While the philosophical and cultural rationale for inclusive education is articulated with *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit*, a separate framework has been outlined to guide the delivery of services. In a 2006 document entitled *Inclusive Education in Nunavut Schools: Student Support Handbook* (Department of Education, Curriculum & School Service, 2006), a model is proposed to support regular classroom placement by building teacher capacity and knowledge. While 75-80% of students are envisioned as having their needs met by classroom teachers trained in diverse methodologies, 20% are seen as needing periodic support that is outlined in an Individual Accommodations Plan, developed by the teacher with input from consultants. It is further imagined that 5-7% of the population may require more intensive supports for severe learning disabilities, social/emotional issues and/or *high need* issues. These five support options are referenced as *Tumits* which are described as:

... pathways/footprints of support. The objective of this support model is to improve the learning environment so as to increase the number of students who can meet the learning outcomes of Nunavut curricula with minimal support and to decrease the number of students who now require intense levels of support because of academic or social/emotional/behavioral challenges. The institution of many best practices in the system as a whole should go a long way to increase the number of students who are successful in their learning. There will always be in any given school population, a small proportion of students who require individualized programs and multiple supports on an ongoing basis in order to meet their learning and life goals. This small group of high needs

students requires collaborative, interagency, support service delivery in order to enhance their learning and prepare them for transition to life as contributing adults in their community (P. 106).

While this Tunit, or Pathways, model is reflective of a cascade of services approach shared with many school regions, NL in particular (Philpott & Nesbit, 2002; Philpott & Dibbon, 2006), it differs in one crucial area – diagnosing and labeling difference. Nunavut sees such separation and streaming by ability or diagnosis as “incompatible with the tenets of both Inclusive Education and *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit*” (Government of Nunavut, 2006. P.114). It is this clear and blatant refusal ever to again allow difference to be seen as a weakness, this determination to remain focused on helping children find *their* strengths and *their* place in the community, that places Nunavut at the forefront of the inclusive education debate.

### **Assessing children in culturally-defined inclusive classrooms**

Nunavut’s reluctance to label children by diagnosing difference is not only based in cultural and philosophic appropriateness but also in a concern for diagnostic accuracy of assessment practices. While the education reform movement fueled immense criticism of the deficit model of special education, it also fueled a debate over the appropriateness of standardized testing (Zigmond & Baker, 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Black & William, 1998; Grobe & McCall, 2004). At a time when education reform was calling for a greater focus on higher standards and stronger accountability indicators (Mittler, 2000), debate was brewing on how achievement was actually being measured and how results were

being interpreted. In discussing this concern, Grobe & McCall (2004) summarize the debate:

Schools and school districts often publish the results of such large-scale tests with little apparent regard for their limited use in improving student performance and system monitoring. Such tests are often not situated within a coherent policy and accountability framework based on learning and overall assessment of student achievement. In addition, the results of the tests are often not correlated or analyzed by context, student and family characteristics, or other factors that determine school or student success. The tests often provide no information that helps students and educators improve their practices. Moreover, invalid uses of large-scale testing have been exacerbated by the news media, narrowly focused interest groups and elected officials (P.131).

This caution for standardized achievement assessment holds particular relevance for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds: issues such as the cultural appropriateness of test content, a lack of facility in English, norm group similarity, cultural value of testing, examiner bias, and non-equitable social and educational opportunities have long been identified as having a negative impact on test validity (Samunda, 1975; Naglieri, 1982; Kaufman & Kaufman, 1983; Cummins, 1984; Armour-Thomas, 1992; Tanner-Halverson et al., 1993; Lewis, 1998; McLellan and Nellis, 2003). Gopaul-McNichol and Armour-Thomas (2002) recognize that within seemingly homogenous sub-cultures much diversity, linguistic variation and socio/cultural experiences exist, and suggest that ability be viewed more within a socio-cultural context. They conclude that a “well documented finding in comparative studies of achievement is that children from low-income, race/ethnic, and linguistic minority backgrounds do less well on these measures than their affluent, culturally

dominant peers....[and results are reflective]... more of the experiences and contexts inimical to the development and expression of academic competence than in some underlying deficiency in academic ability” (P. 72). Samunda (1998) discusses the recent growth of “culturally fair” assessment instruments and cautions that fairness involves more than just selecting instruments which are marketed as culturally fair, since such instruments often have only reduced content bias, and completely ignore language differences.

This universal recognition of the inappropriateness of using standardized assessment among culturally/linguistically diverse students assumes even greater prominence when the discussion moves to labeling ability. The literature is unanimous regarding the blatant over-representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education (Gersten et al., 2001; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Artiles, 2003) and questions abound about the appropriateness of diagnosing difference. Senior (1993) argues that this literature is of particular relevance to Canada’s heterogeneous Native population where labeling difference will exacerbate cultural marginalization and do little to optimize educational opportunity. Berry (1986) also cautions against using test scores to describe ability, emphasizing that standardized tests are culturally biased and that the scores they yield invite inappropriate assumptions. He, too, warns that these assumptions will do nothing to provide enhanced learning, and states, “As psychologists, we should admit that we do not know in any absolute or *a priori* sense what intelligence is in other cultures, and until we do, we should not use our construct to describe their cognitive competencies, nor our tests to measure



them” (P. 149). The literature tends to agree that, at most, such instruments could be used as general indicators of need rather than fixed labels of functioning (Sodowsky et al., 1998; Brown et al., 1997; Bracken & McCallum, 1998/2001; Feuerstein et al., 1998; Sattler, 2001).

### Authentic assessment

How then, can educators accurately monitor student performance, identify when supports are needed, and optimize individualized programming for students with significant needs? If “testing” progress and ability is so universally cautioned against, what practices are suggested? What does emerge from this wealth of literature is support for a multiplicity of approaches that reflect broader views on student outcomes by encouraging educators to rely less on even the most carefully selected quantitative instruments and more on qualitative, classroom-based approaches. Padilla (2001) articulates this multiplicity of assessment practices, void of labels, and calls for “... a paradigm shift ...wherein the study of a specific ethnic group, especially if comparison is likely to be biased, should not examine students from a perspective of their failures in the educational system; rather it should concentrate on how to achieve success regardless of the task or level involved” (P. 23). Such approaches attempt to create assessment practices which strive to “ensure that judgments made about behavior of individuals and groups are accurate and that the decisions made do not intentionally or unintentionally favor some cultural group over another” (Gopaul-McNichol & Armour-Thomas, 2002, P.10).

Sattler (1992) argues that authentic assessment should be a priority for

all students given that multiple indicators afford a more holistic perspective on a child's functioning, and cautions against assessment being seen as "...a test score or a number" (P.5). Darling-Hammond and Falk (1997) herald this approach by calling for a redesigning of assessment measures that are "responsive to the differing perspectives of diverse populations; building the capacities of teachers to use a range of strategies that will help students to achieve the standards; designing new forms of assessment that better support and reflect what is being taught; and creating systems for curriculum, assessment and schooling that support student learning rather than merely pointing out deficiencies with new measures" (P. 51-52). Black and William (1998) support this focus on capacity building in teachers by strengthening the relationship link between assessment and teaching. They suggest that this "...helps low achievers more than any other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall" (P.3). Goodwin and Macdonald (1997) and Lidz (2001) argue that such an approach yields data that are much more child-centered and accurate for aboriginal students.

#### A suggested model

The effectiveness of authentic approaches for identifying the learning needs of children was typified by Philpott et al. (2004b) who conducted a large scale assessment project of the Innu of Labrador. Equipped with the goal of pinpointing the learning needs of all Innu children so as to address long-standing concerns for educational outcomes, the team conducted what was the largest assessment project on aboriginal youth in Canada. A model of assessment was

developed that blended qualitative approaches with carefully selected quantitative instruments in an effort to "...focus on the identification of the strengths of Innu children as well as the conditions that enable or impede the application of these strengths when learning" (Philpott et al. 2004b, P.10). Subsequently, teachers were in-serviced on authentic assessment practices and encouraged to share their observations on their students. Following extensive reviews of quantitative instruments, the students were assessed using formalized measures that were seen as *culturally fairer*, and even then were only used as a general indicator of functioning. The researchers quickly discovered a dramatic match between the qualitative and the quantitative data:

Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is that the results validate the perceptions and impressions that key informants - Innu leaders and educators - reported at the outset: Innu youth are of average ability, consistently display diverse strengths and abilities, and lag in formal school achievement levels due, in large part, to poor attendance. This report serves to synthesize and validate these perceptions and articulate a baseline for intervention. It reveals the magnitude of educational need and, at the same time, begins to chart a course for change (Philpott et al., 2004b, P. 23).

The two-year study yielded a wealth of data that have gone on to serve as the baseline of an enhanced model of Innu education (Philpott et al., 2005). More significant to this debate is the fact that the study on Innu children has offered educators of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds an assessment alternative. It reflects the debate on culturally fair assessment and supports authentic approaches to identifying need and enhancing teaching and learning versus labeling children within a diagnostic/prescriptive model. It reflects the plethora of data that calls for authentic assessment that leading to enhanced

learning opportunities for children (Chappuis, 2005; Stanley, 2003; Burns, 2002; Hargrove, 2000). A two-year follow-up study on the needs of students in one of these two Innu communities, Natuashish, (Philpott, 2006) identified dramatic improvements in reading, writing, attendance and school participation. That report concluded that “children who only know school as it exists now in Natuashish, have attendance and achievement levels remarkably close to provincial averages” (Philpott, 2006. P.22). In the four years since the initial study was begun, a detailed action plan developed, and the follow up study completed, not one Innu child was labeled.

The finding of Philpott et al. (2004b) parallels the findings of a review of assessment and screening practices among early childhood programs in British Columbia. That review concluded that “front-line staff in community-based programs can offer valuable feedback, based on experiences, about the relative merits, appropriate use, challenges, and outcomes of using a variety of standardized and non-formal developmental screening and assessment tools” (Ball, 2006. P.31). It also mirrors a study of assessment practices among maternal and child health programs in First Nations and Inuit communities. Those authors also identified a dearth of culturally appropriate instruments and, in such absence, strongly suggested that it is “essential to ensure that the process surrounding the implementation of screening tools be characterized by culturally sensitive and respectful approaches, especially in the relationship between practitioners and parents/women” (Dion Stout & Jodoin, 2006. P.41).

## Nunavut's model of assessment

It is within this debate of linking assessment with classroom teaching while being respectful of culture that we again turn to Nunavut. As was the case with its articulation of inclusive education, Nunavut has also courageously faced the challenging task of balancing traditional culture with contemporary pedagogy in an effort to provide inclusive environments for its students:

In Nunavut the term *ilitauvalliajunik qaujinasungniq* has been used to describe the process of assessment in schools. This term refers to assessment as a method of “monitoring” students...it represents the dynamic interaction of teaching, learning and assessment. Assessment should be seen as a process that improves both teaching and learning. The assessment process begins on the day that the students enter the classroom and we, as teachers, begin to learn who they are, what they know, and what they want to know...it is linked closely to goal setting and learning outcomes. It is a collaborative process that involves all the partners in a learning/teaching community – those in the classroom and those in the home and community. It is a process that evolves over time, involving interaction between teaching and learning, and teacher and student (Department of Education, Curriculum & School Services, 2003. P.3).

Motivated by the goal of connecting assessment with teaching, they have outlined seven key principles of culturally appropriate assessment:

1. supports continuous learning for all students
2. shows respect for all learners
3. recognizes each student's unique talents and skills
4. emphasizes the interdependence, growth, and success of the group
5. needs to be outcome-based
6. has different purposes
7. is authentic, meaningful, and builds on student strengths (P.7)

Using the pictorial representation of inclusion, Nunavut also presents its assessment practices through art, featuring the image of an Inuit hunter using a *sabgut* or *naukkuti* to examine snow (Figure 2). The description of the significance of this image is as reminiscent of the literature on authentic

assessment as it is of the elders' role in guiding students to find their strengths and to use those strengths to help the community.



Effective assessment requires good tools. The sabgut is a tool used for finding good snow for iglu building or for testing the thickness of ice. The sabgut or naukkuti is an essential tool for survival on the land. In order to use it properly, it is necessary to practise with it, testing snow and ice to get the feel and sound of it, and using this information in combination with observations of other elements in the environment that help locate good snow or bad ice. In Nunavut, we want to provide our teachers with the best assessment tools and opportunities to practice and develop skills in using these tools to effectively assess our students... In addition to good tools and practice, another key concept for assessment is that it must be authentic. Just as becoming expert at using the sabgut or naukkuti involves a hands-on application and accumulated experience over time, our students' learning has to be grounded in real life experiences. Students need to participate actively in connecting the learning outcomes from the curriculum to their personal realities. Effective assessment must be real as well as developmentally and culturally appropriate (Department of Education, Curriculum & School Services, 2003. P.3).

## Summary

The global paradigm shift from a deficit/medical model of responding to diverse needs towards a philosophy of inclusion implies added significance in Canada, where cultural and linguistic diversity is increasingly becoming the norm.

Such perspective of embracing difference resonates particularly well among the country's indigenous population who know all too well the effects of being viewed as different and having a marginalized, second stream of options open to them. Arising out of this shift in thinking is a parallel call to move away from testing and labeling the magnitude of difference, and to move towards a pragmatic focus on how to enhance the educational opportunities for all students. Such a perspective not only echoes the wealth of literature emerging from the global field but also resonates within Canada's indigenous population whose core cultural belief sees difference as opportunity. Philpott et al. (2004) summarize this paradigm shift in education as being characterized by:

Paradigms of Care	
Special Education	Inclusive Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded in a medical model</li> <li>• Asks what's wrong with the child</li> <li>• Focus on deficits</li> <li>• Prescriptive</li> <li>• Diagnoses diversity</li> <li>• Tolerates differences</li> <li>• Takes child out</li> <li>• Resource-building</li> <li>• Relies on an external "expert"</li> <li>• Professionalized</li> <li>• Mandated</li> <li>• Eurocentric culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded in civil liberties</li> <li>• Asks what's wrong with the environment</li> <li>• Focus on strategies</li> <li>• Malleable</li> <li>• Values diversity</li> <li>• Embraces differences</li> <li>• Keeps child in</li> <li>• Capacity-building</li> <li>• Teacher/parent as expert</li> <li>• Personalized</li> <li>• Community supported</li> <li>• Indigenous culture</li> </ul>

It is within this global shift in thinking that the Canadian territory of Nunavut arises as an example. Far from being free of challenges, Nunavut has nonetheless been exemplary in looking to the future while valuing the past. It would appear that the people of Nunavut have learned from the struggles of

special education and are availing of the opportunity to begin at a place that many school systems are striving to reach. There is little doubt that their unique articulation of inclusion and their perspective on the suitability of assessment have been well informed by the wealth of literature on failed practice. It certainly echoes the work of Jordan and Stanovick (2004) who identified three core constructs to help make inclusion work at a classroom level: teachers' beliefs about their roles and responsibilities, teachers' sense of their efficacy, and the collective belief of the school staff toward inclusive practices. This collective will in Nunavut has set a standard to which the rest of the country can aspire by focusing on empowering classroom teachers, respecting culture and working diligently towards creating a society where all people belong. This has required not only wisdom but also courage. Despite the near universal rejection of a deficit model of service, many school systems continue to hold to standardized assessment to guaranteeing that funding mechanisms be the gatekeepers of support services. If Nunavut is to continue its leadership in this field, it will have to move draft policies into firm practice. The people of Nunavut will have to accept that many of their struggles - poor attendance, low achievement, limited graduation rates and concern over social promotions/grade retention - have little to do with labeling difference and more to do with creating supportive learning communities.

Such an eloquent enunciation of true culturally-defined inclusion put forth by Canada's novice educators is, nonetheless reflective of the transformative role of education – especially among disenfranchised groups. Freire (1974) discusses



the challenges of an oppressed people struggling to find courage to set a different course and not to succumb to the pressure of replicating the methods of the dominant culture. He references it as the “pedagogy of the oppressed” – where the inherent message of being socially marginalized is the belief that you deserve nothing better. Freire theorizes that lasting change is best begun from within:

This lesson and this apprenticeship must come, however, from the oppressed themselves and from those who are truly solitary with them. As individuals or as peoples, by fighting for the restoration of their humanity they will be attempting the restoration of true generosity. Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. (Retrieved from: <http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/philosophy/education/freire/freire-1.html>)

While Nunavut strives for a better world for its people, it offers much for the rest of us to reflect on.

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