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Decolonising Assessment: Can we ever really assess for justice and equity?

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[Brackets indicate moments in which the transcriber was unsure of the words used.]

Hello, everyone! I'm Rachael Jacobs. I use she and her pronouns. I'm from Western Sydney University and I am indeed very, very honored to be presenting on a topic that's very dear to my heart.

I thank the organizers sincerely. I also thank them for programming me towards the beginning of the program. It is quarter to one in the morning over here so if I'm looking a little dazed that's probably the reason why, but as I said it's really wonderful to be seeing you in this format. I absolutely wish I was in Florida and was planning to be there, but this has attracted so many people from around the world! I'm really excited to see so many people and I hope that what I say today has some relevance to your context.

Well, I will begin with an acknowledgment of country. I'm sitting on Gadigal land in the Eora Nation and Western Sydney University sits on Darug and Dawhal land and I acknowledge the elders past, present and emerging.

I also acknowledge any First Nations people on this session today, thank them for their custodianship of the land for thousands of years. The land that I sit on was never ceded, it was, is, and always will be aboriginal land.

Acknowledgement is absolutely the right place to start this particular presentation as well because it's a reminder that to decolonize our curriculum and learning, we have to include assessment in that conversation as well. Now, I do have some goals as I was advised: what I want to do today is to start a conversation with you. The start of I hope a very deep and rich and meaningful ongoing conversation about issues of decolonization in assessment. I've got four models I'd like to present to you of decolonized assessment practices, by no means of course an exhaustive list, and begin a conversation around some models that might be present in your own context and I only have 15 minutes to present but I want to give 2 of those minutes over to First Nations elder in Australia - an actor and an activist, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks. And this is an address she famously gave on National TV, on our National Broadcaster and I'd like to begin by taking some time out to hear Rosalie's words of wisdom.

Jeff, you can play the video.

[ROSALIE] "I am not something that fell out of the sky for the pleasure of somebody putting another culture into this cultured

being. John chose what is an ongoing denial of me. I am not an aboriginal or indeed indigenous. I am [Arendra Ayawera] First Nations person. A sovereign person from this country.

I didn't come from overseas. I came from here. My language in spite of whiteness trying to penetrate into my brain by assimilationists. I am alive. I am here and now and I will speak my language. I practice my cultural essence of me. Don't try and suppress me and don't call me a problem. I am not the problem. I have never left my country nor have I seeded any part of it. Nobody has entered into a treaty or talked to me about who I am.

I am [Arendra. Ayawera.] Female elder from this country. Please remember that I am not the problem.

[Applause. End of clip.]

Thank you for sharing that Jeff and thank you everyone for your grace in listening there.

I find that statement unbelievably powerful as well as the applause that followed. Rosalie has absolutely nailed it. *I am the result of the pressure of somebody putting another culture into this cultured being.* Colonised practices see Rosie, and other First Nations and people of color as the problem. When the actual problem is the legacy of colonisation, the history of dispossession, the history of slavery, intergenerational trauma, systemic inequality, racism and marginalisation, and the rise of white supremacy. As we all know, these have flow-on effects. For example, turning into poverty and to link to Susanne's presentation, as the world went digital, there's a digital divide so access to education can be completely very difficult as well.

Ibram X Kendi reminds us that there is no 'achievement gap'. In fact this is a manufactured term. He states: "our faith in standardized tests causes us to believe that the racial gap in test scores means something is wrong with the Black test takers and not the tests" and he adds *the "achievement gap has been opening the door to racist ideas."* Actually he poses that as a question.

I'll give you an example from here in Australia, in NSW which is the state where I live, we have 21 fully selective schools and these are for "academically gifted students" and you need to do an exam to gain entry to this.

Now I've run some analysis over First Nation's enrollments in those schools and it is close to non-existent. It is absolutely, of course, ludicrous to say that our First Nation students aren't smart enough for these schools. Instead, we recognize that we have created an exclusive system and any system that excludes our First Nation's people is a racist system.

So, Kendi reframes the achievement gap as an opportunity gap. So, first and foremost, one of our first steps can be to eradicate achievement gap thinking from our practice. So, achievement gap thinking that places black, indigenous, and people of color at the center of the problem, and so if we shift our thinking to recognizing that there is an opportunity gap, then that can go some of the way towards decolonizing our assessment

practices. But, we have to go beyond language and I've pointedly asked the question in the title of this presentation "can we ever *really* assess for justice and equity?"

Assessment is often thought of as the enemy of justice and the enemy of equity. It's popularly characterized — if you ask most people to imagine assessment, they imagine rows of people at desks, regurgitating facts and things like that in writing with high-stakes tests, and they're designed to equalize us objectively, blend us all into this faceless amalgam of learning outcomes, where the person isn't important, their background isn't important, but what they write on the paper is important.

Now despite this view of assessment, I am an assessment researcher. I am also a teacher. I am a proud brown woman. I have a colonised history and heritage. I am also living a coloniser life in Australia. I lecture in teacher education. I do not agree with that popular characterization of assessment. I know that many or most of you wouldn't either. For its many faults and there are very many, I buy into the possibilities of assessment. I believe assessment is necessary. I believe it is critically important. I think it can help provide enabling constraints for play and for creativity. It can provide a frame for people to demonstrate their imagination and achievement in the arts. The next step is for it to become an instrument of equity and justice, as must everything in education now because if we're not creating instruments of justice then what are we even doing?

Now, before I go on I'll shadow that there may be a cultural disconnect when we talk about assessment practice. For example, here in Australia, we do have high stakes tests. They're mostly brought about by pressure from conservative governments, but they are quite few and they are always deeply problematized when they're used.

They are only one type of task of a rich assessment landscapes that includes a multitude of tasks and rich experiences. In Australia, we also don't have creativity tests. I've been hearing a lot about these when I listen to people like Ron Beghetto and Yang Xiao talk about creativity and creativity schools that require tests to enter those. So, that's something that's a little bit unfamiliar to me, but having said this let's have a look at some of these alternative models.

So, firstly — actually before I move to the models, when we talk about decolonization and education the conversation often centers around content, that means studying black, indigenous, or people of color who are writers or their histories or texts or art or science, and of course this is critically important, but the conversation around assessment has to go beyond content.

So, rather than saying we assess a range of texts from a range of different contexts — in global south context — if we do that even if we do that, we might still be embedding those texts into racialized and colonized systems. So, the effect of that could be that you're actually, as a student if you're a black, indigenous or a person of color, you could be marginalized inside a system while studying your own history or studying a text from your heritage and this is why we wanted to look at models to move towards systemic change.

So, I'll start by talking about Eizadirad from Ontario, Canada who, like Kendi, talks about there being inequality of opportunity and the need to assess students in local communities using an ecological place-based approach that uses these exquisitely beautiful themes: love, cooperation, reciprocity, and sacrifice. They argue that these components cannot be measured quantitatively rather than qualitatively over time and they're measured

through students' thoughts, words, and actions. So, it's a much broader view of assessment than a traditional one which we might be used to.

To return to Kendi, he argues that different environments cause different kinds of achievement rather than different levels of achievement. So, he has asked what if the intellect of a low testing black child is different but not inferior to the intellect of a high testing white child? So, some different ways to measure this might be measuring literacy by how knowledgeable individuals are about their own environment, measuring an individual's desire to know rather than what they know — and we know that facts and content knowledge have a different currency now, there certainly is a place for content but, you know, you can google anything so we have to reframe the way that we do assess. He talks about opening minds, rather than filling minds and then testing how full they are.

I'm now in the next model going to go to my friends across the ditch, as we say here, my friends in New Zealand. So Fiona Cram is a Maori — is a New Zealand, First Nation's researcher — and Fiona and many, many others have written about Kaupapa Maori, which is the Maori way.

Now I am not First Nations, a First Nations New Zealander, I am not even a New Zealander, so I have no authority to speak on this matter. This is a gentle invitation for you to do your own reading and own investigation about these approaches because they are so highly developed. Kaupapa Maori evaluation looks inwards to assess the students development in Maori terms and then looks outwards in structural analysis of any barriers that there might be to that development. It embeds Maori learning in cultural norms and understandings into the assessment framework and, in some cases, it involves parents and the community in the assessment process.

And finally, from some context that is very familiar to me, is in Australian systems in primary schools, what you might call elementary education, the tasks and the methods of assessing that have spoken to me in terms of decolonization are always more diagnostic. They are always more formative. They are matched to the content of the community that they are in. They are inclusive of all cultures and languages, such as using trans-linguaging approaches, where we don't ask people to leave their home language at the door, where all languages are welcomed in the learning environment and genuinely welcomed. It uses multiple methods.

In Australia, you can assess using multiple methods in the one classroom for the one learning aim or achievement or outcome. So, for example in drama, if you have a class that's doing a task you can have one set of students who are going to be working on a writing task, another set of students might be using a soundscape, another set of students might be doing a movement piece, that is absolutely fine and really accessible to all students and acceptable. What is really intricate is explaining to politicians, the media, policy makers — many of whom do not have a background in education and many of whom are white — that these tasks are actually richer more intricate more valuable than mass testing and regurgitation of facts.

I want to, of course, mention the arts as uniquely placed here. Our assessment tasks are aesthetically charged, multimodal. They're sites of cultural transmission. They're focused on students' originality — their life experience and their creation. But that doesn't mean that the arts assessment is immune from exacerbating disadvantage or immune from being a site of white supremacy.

Now the models that I've mentioned are just the tip of the iceberg and, of course, there are so many others when I'd love to hear your own in your own context. It is, of course, by no means a definitive list. I also recognize this is a very global north list, even though it does spotlight models from Black, First Nations, or researchers of color, and there are many esteemed assessment experts here today that could share many of their own models or wisdom to start this rich conversation.

I will finish here by saying that we are in a turning point in history and we are in a moment of chaos as we all know. But with this chaos comes possibility.

So, in Australia this week, the year 12 students in my state they commenced their leaving school exams this week. These poor students, some of whom haven't been for at school for six weeks or even months at a time -- I cannot imagine the stress that they are under. So, this year we're taking a lot of other things into consideration apart from just a test score. There are other ways that they could get into university or a vocation — other measures of showing students aptitude for a course. So, for example to get into the course that I teach, there is an interview component. That is nothing new. That's been used in many, many fields for many, many years, including in medicine.

Of course, leadership by black, indigenous, and people of color educators is the key and that is not token leadership to do the work. It is a genuine shifting of a conversation to lead with decolonized perspectives in education. And I want to finish with a word from an artist and a word from a man of color as well. This quote is from jazz drummer Max Roach that reminds us of the importance of decolonizing, but on our own terms. He says, "My point is that we must decolonize our minds and rename and redefine ourselves... in all respects — culturally, politically, and socially. We must redefine ourselves and our lives in our own terms."

Resources:

- Cram, F. (2016). Lessons on decolonizing evaluation from Kaupapa Maori evaluation. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, 30*(3).
<https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.30.3.312>
- Eizadirad, A. (2019). *Decolonizing educational assessment: Ontario elementary students and the EQAO*. Springer Nature.
- Kendi, I. X. (2016, October 20). *Why the academic achievement gap is a racist idea*. AAIHS. <https://www.aaihs.org/why-the-academic-achievement-gap-is-a-racist-idea/>
- McKinley, S. (2000). *Māori parents and education/Ko ngā mātua Māori me te mātauranga*. NZCER (New Zealand Council for Educational Research). <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/8391.pdf>