

FEATURES OF Culturally Responsive Assessment FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS



Indigenous students in the United States and U.S.-affiliated Pacific Region schools have varying degrees of access to culturally responsive, sustaining, and revitalizing education. Academic assessments that intend to capture what these students know and can do, are not always designed in ways that allow students to do so nor are they designed to support educators in recognizing student excellence when they see it. In this way, assessments may underestimate Indigenous students' skills and knowledge and interfere with, rather than support, their academic success—from course grades, to specialized program placement, to graduation and attending college.¹

This infographic summarizes six salient features of assessments that are discussed in key peer-reviewed articles on culturally responsive assessment for Indigenous students. The considerations can be used as a jumping-off point for conversations and decision making concerning assessments, in particular by:

- **teachers** who serve Indigenous students in the classroom, and who are using and developing their own assessments for formative and summative purposes.
- **education leaders** and **assessment developers** seeking to move assessment systems to be more culturally responsive for Indigenous students and other marginalized student populations.

Why focus on **INDIGENOUS STUDENT ASSESSMENT?**



The term *Indigenous* refers to the original inhabitants of a country or region. In U.S. educational settings, Indigenous students include the broad demographic categories of American Indian and Alaska Native in North America, and Native Hawaiian in Hawai'i. The U.S.-affiliated Pacific Region also is home to Indigenous populations representing various cultures and languages. Although they share no single ethnicity, culture, or language, many Indigenous peoples do have similar histories of colonization and worldviews that emphasize respect for the natural world and spiritual values.

Three concepts that are of utmost importance when considering culturally responsive schooling, including assessments, particularly for Indigenous students in the United States, include:²

- **Sovereignty and self-determination of tribal nations, Indigenous peoples, and the Pacific nations in free association with the United States** mean that Indigenous peoples have the right to determine the nature of schooling for their students.
- **Indigenous students in various schooling contexts may undergo pervasive and consistent racism**, including paternalism, prejudice, harmful assumptions, low expectations, stereotypes, and biased curricular materials.
- **Indigenous communities have epistemologies (the theory and nature of knowledge) passed down through generations** that are not limited to a narrow set of specialized concepts and rules, which are considered as knowledge in mainstream education.

"Educational assessment, as it is typically conducted in U.S. schools, does not successfully capture or build on potentially important content knowledge and understanding of Indigenous students."

(NELSON-BARBER & TRUMBULL, 2007, P. 132)



LANGUAGE

What languages are most often used for instruction and are familiar to students in and outside of the classroom?

Language use is integrally tied to identity, influencing how students demonstrate their learning. Assessment creators should seek to craft questions, instructions, and prompts that use clear, plain language that is familiar to students and parallels what has been used in instruction. This goes for classrooms where the language of instruction is English, or the Indigenous language.

1. Assess students in the language in which they have been (primarily) taught.
2. If assessments are to be developed in two languages, develop them in tandem, going back and forth between language versions to ensure they are assessing the same constructs.
3. Do not assume that a translation from English to the Indigenous language will be valid. Translating is full of pitfalls, and the two language versions are not likely to be equivalent.
4. Recognize that students speak different varieties of English or other languages, and assessment in some "standard" variety may not be understood as well as their own language variety.
5. Understand that students exposed to more than one language may know some things in one language and other things in the other language(s).
6. Strive to use clear language, particularly if assessing in English, without eliminating important content vocabulary or simplifying concepts.
7. Periodically interview students about how they have construed a question or instructions on a written assessment for feedback about how to improve how assessments are written.
8. If at all possible, allow students to choose the language in which they wish to be assessed or to use their home language, in addition to English, if they so desire.

(Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019, p. 4)



CONTENT

What content should be assessed, based on what was taught, and is the context appropriate?

Assessment content should align to standards that represent Indigenous communities' values regarding their children's education and draw heavily on local cultural wisdom, knowledge, and skills.

- Assessments should align to a community-developed, system-adopted **cultural framework** or set of **cultural standards**, when available.
Examples: Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ) in Hawai'i, the North Dakota Native American Essential Understandings, or the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools.
- Indigenous communities and students may value assessments that reflect different dimensions of well-being—academic, physical, and emotional.
- Teachers might consider alternative ways to assess national content standards that may not align with culturally responsive practices. For example, a math standard that asks students to "construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others" may be more appropriately assessed as supporting students through respectful, collaborative discussions.



FORMAT

How can the assessment format align with Indigenous ways of knowing and demonstrating learning?

Assessment formats that emphasize cooperation and reflection in a meaningful and authentic context should be prioritized.

- Examples of assessment formats that emphasize cooperation and reflection in a meaningful and authentic context can include performance-based assessments, portfolios, student self-evaluation and reflection, peer assessment, interviews, and talking/discussion circles.
- Allowing student choice and self-regulation in assessment (the student is the source of their own feedback and goals) is important.
- Avoid limiting responses to written formats. Allow for different kinds of demonstrations and products for students to help each other, when possible.



ADMINISTRATION

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How does the assessment process provide opportunities for student choice and flexibility in completing problems or tasks?

Flexibility in the timing of the assessment and allowing cooperation among students may yield better results for assessing what students have learned.

- Many Indigenous students are socialized to attempt a task only when they believe they are ready to perform well. It may be more culturally congruent to allow students choice over when they are assessed.
- Untimed assessments may provide more options for Indigenous students to show all they know and can do, should their orientation to time differ from that of the dominant culture.
- Framing assessment as a cooperative activity, rather than a competition, may be important for Indigenous students.



SCORING

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How are student responses, products, or performances scored or evaluated, and who decides what is a “correct” response?

Indigenous students may share perspectives that differ from those accounted for in typical answer keys. A scoring process that includes both educators and community members will support teachers in being able to recognize excellence, should students demonstrate their learning in unfamiliar ways.

Students should know ahead of time how their work will be evaluated.

A “one right answer” approach to assessment does not value the multiple perspectives that students can offer. On construct-response items or extended written responses when student answers may vary, it is important that a wide range of perspectives is allowed if students meet the core requirements of the prompt.

Scoring protocols and guides must clarify what is to be scored, as differences in language use or spelling may be misinterpreted as errors of comprehension.

Include parents, community members, and Elders in scoring and interpreting student performance whenever possible. Teachers can also use student interviews to better understand student responses, performances, or products. Confirm procedures with your school or district for involving community members in various types of assessment scoring.



USE

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How are the assessment results intended to be used, and what processes are in place to ensure fair and equitable use of such results?

Assessment for Indigenous students should prioritize formative uses of assessment information to help teachers improve their instruction and to help students improve their learning.

Teachers should consider the types of negative consequences for students (for example, a grade for a course) when using scores for summative purposes. System leaders should carefully consider the negative consequences (for example, placing into a specialized program, graduating, or getting accepted into college) of summative assessments at a system level and ways to remove or mitigate these assessment-related barriers for Indigenous students.

Formative assessments, with the purpose of improving teaching and learning, are ideal to support Indigenous students in the classroom.

Representatives of the Indigenous community should be involved in every step for new assessment design and development to ensure cultural validity, which in the beginning includes defining the purpose and use of the desired assessment.

WORKING WITH Indigenous Communities

Those working in and with Indigenous communities must first take the time to observe and learn about the local cultures and languages, local history from multiple perspectives, and local social contexts, including appropriate ways of communicating, interacting, and making decisions affecting the community. Working side-by-side with cultural experts—such as community Elders or cultural practitioners—to clarify unique features, contours, and needs is essential for authentic assessment work.

CULTURAL VALIDITY IN Assessment Development

Assessments are tools and artifacts of culture, reflecting the values, beliefs, and priorities of the culture in which they were developed. The concept of *cultural validity* in the assessment development process entails consideration for the sociocultural context in which students live and learn, including how their experiences shape the way they understand assessment questions and respond to assessment items or tasks.^{4,5,6}

The features and observations in this infographic about the limitations of current assessment practices apply to both classroom assessments and large-scale standardized tests. However, additional assessment design, review, and analysis considerations would need to be specified for large-scale standardized tests. The aim of ensuring cultural validity must ground the steps of the test development assessment (such as item writing and review processes and procedures, differential item functioning analysis, etc.).

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¹ Castagno, A. E., & Brayboy, B. (2008). Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(4), 941–993.

² McCarty, T., & Lee, T. (2014). Critical culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy and Indigenous education sovereignty. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 101–124.

³ Solano-Flores, G., & Nelson-Barber, S. (2001). On the cultural validity of science assessments. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 38(5), 553–573.

⁴ Basterra, M., Trumbull, E., & Solano-Flores, G. (2011). *Cultural validity in assessment*. New York, NY: Routledge.

⁵ Shultz, P. K., & Englert, K. (2021). Cultural validity as foundational to assessment development: An Indigenous example. *Frontiers in Education*, 6, 1–11.