

“What’s the Use?”: Undoing, Decolonizing, Liberating, and Righting Literacies Assessment in Turbulent Times

Michelle Honeyford et Jennifer Watt

Volume 26, numéro 3, 2024

Special Issue: Literacy Teachers Navigating Turbulent Times in Canada

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1114600ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29724>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada

ISSN

1496-0974 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Honeyford, M. & Watt, J. (2024). “What’s the Use?”: Undoing, Decolonizing, Liberating, and Righting Literacies Assessment in Turbulent Times. *Language and Literacy / Langue et littérature*, 26(3), 137–154.
<https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29724>

Résumé de l'article

This conceptual paper extends the Re-imagining Literacies Assessment knowledge mobilization project and its goals of undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment, explored through examples of assessment-in-use in classrooms with young children, a Cree language immersion program, anti-racist writing pedagogy, and research in reading instruction and assessment. In conversation with one another, three assemblings of stories, relations, complications, and questions are presented, drawing attention to assessment in relation to noticing, positioning, and dis/re/connecting. Undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting become concepts to use in thinking through the use of assessment and in proposing urgent and emergent questions, practices, and possibilities for students and teachers.

© Michelle Honeyford et Jennifer Watt, 2024



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d’auteur. L’utilisation des services d’Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d’utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l’Université de Montréal, l’Université Laval et l’Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

“What’s the Use?”: Undoing, Decolonizing, Liberating, and Righting Literacies Assessment in Turbulent Times

MICHELLE HONEYFORD
University of Manitoba

JENNIFER WATT
University of Manitoba

Abstract

This conceptual paper extends the *Re-imagining Literacies Assessment* knowledge mobilization project and its goals of *undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting* assessment, explored through examples of assessment-in-use in classrooms with young children, a Cree language immersion program, anti-racist writing pedagogy, and research in reading instruction and assessment. In conversation with one another, three assemblings of stories, relations, complications, and questions are presented, drawing attention to assessment in relation to *noticing, positioning, and dis/re/connecting*. Undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting become concepts to use in thinking through the *use* of assessment and in proposing urgent and emergent questions, practices, and possibilities for students and teachers.

In this special issue on literacy teachers navigating turbulent times in Canada, we turn the focus to assessment. Over the past year, we have embarked on a project to re-imagine literacies assessment by mobilizing research on *undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting* assessment. With a Working Group of educators from across Manitoba, the goals of the *Re-Imagining Literacies Assessment* (RLA) project were to: 1) examine and challenge issues of power and (in)equity related to language and literacies curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment; 2) envision and propose more equitable, inclusive, and decolonizing approaches through re-imagining, re-thinking, and re-conceptualizing language and literacies learning and assessment; and 3) call for and enact change in assessment practices and policy in language and literacies education (Honeyford et al., 2023; *Re-imagining Literacies Assessment*, 2023).

The goals for the project reflect the need we perceived for critical conversations about language and literacies curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment—in classrooms, schools, and school divisions; in initial teacher education and graduate programs in language and literacies education; in provincial professional organizations and branches of the department of education; as well as in the media, among parent groups, legislators, and policy makers. Curriculum and pedagogy informed by broader understandings of language and literacies—for instance, as defined in the provincial English Language Arts curriculum framework (2020) or the LLRC/ACCLL Position Statement (2023) (see Table 1)—

continue to be challenged in everyday practice by assessment (Honeyford & Yaman Ntelioglou, 2021).

Table 1
Broader Understandings of Language and Literacies

Provincial ELA Curriculum Framework	LLRC/ACCLL Position Statement
Language and literacies are symbolic socio-cultural systems through which human beings create and share meaning...by using the conventional meaning-making and meaning-sharing practices within their socio-cultural groups, while at the same time inventing new ones. (Manitoba Education, 2020, p. 5)	LLRC/ACCLL understands “literacy” broadly and situationally as the ways in which people make meaning and use language (written and multimodal) for a range of purposes and in a variety of forms as they navigate different linguistic spheres and sociocultural and material conditions. (LLRC/ACCLL, 2023, para. 1)

In other words, more expansive definitions and theories of language and literacies, and their goal of realizing more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and decolonizing curriculum and pedagogies, are limited by assessment. Thus, the purpose of RLA was to mobilize literacies research and knowledge to re-imagine literacies assessment by connecting educators, educational leaders, and educational researchers across systems that often work in isolation; by revealing and challenging assessment discourses and practices that perpetuate inequity and injustice; and by informing and supporting individual- and systems-level examination of assessment practice and policy.

As a research mobilization project, the implications of assessment were, in many ways, the focus of this project. So rather than pose the “so what” question at the end of this paper, we begin with it. Moreso, “so what” has become *method*, as we channel Sarah Ahmed—and Virginia Woolf—and ask, “what’s the use [of assessment]?” (Ahmed, 2019). In the introduction to *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (2019), Ahmed recounts several instances in Woolf’s books when female characters ask “what’s the use?” In fact, Woolf turned the question on herself in a letter she wrote to her friend Margaret Llewelyn Davies, questioning, “what’s the use of my writing novels?” Asking what’s the use, Ahmed (2019) suggests, “implies that some things we *do*, things we *are used to*, things we are *asked to get used to*, are in the way of a feminist project of living differently” [emphasis added] (p. 3). Limitations on women’s roles were getting in the way of Woolf living differently—of being a writer. We begin then, by asking, “What’s the use of assessment?” Or, how might assessment be getting in the way of living literacies differently—more equitably, more inclusively, in ways that actively work to diversify and decolonize ways of teaching, learning, knowing, and being in our classrooms and schools?

Assessment was the object of a lot of “what’s the use” questions for educators in the province-wide study we conducted to better understand the relationship between

curricular change (the renewal of the K-12 English Language Arts curriculum framework in Manitoba) and pedagogical change (the beliefs and practices that inform the teaching of language arts and literacy in classrooms and schools) (Honeyford et al., 2022). As our research showed (Honeyford & Yaman Ntelioglou, 2021), teachers were engaging students in “mak[ing] meaning and us[ing] language (written and multimodal) for a range of purposes and in a variety of forms” (LLRC Position Statement, 2023, Para. 1) but were then bumping into assessment and reporting structures that reduced rich, contextualized processes and narratives of learning over time to a number, letter, or scale. The educators were left asking in various ways, “What’s the use?” In the complexities of students’ literacy practices, in contexts of rich learning experiences, in beautiful a-ha moments, in conversations and observations and artifacts: What’s the use of assessment that misses so much? What’s the use of assessment that always feels behind, not-quite-right, and never enough? What’s the use of elaborate and time-consuming measures that focus less on student learning, and more on justifying a number, letter, or level?

Educators’ questions arose from assessment in everyday use, most often about classroom assessment and the misalignment of learning, grading, and reporting. But they also raised questions about assessment-in-use in schools and school divisions related to equity, resources, and data. Their questions and exasperations grew from systems, policies, and practices and their biases, from frustration that changes haven’t been made, despite knowing better, despite commitments to diversity, inclusion, and decolonizing education. As Ahmed (2019) explains,

The question, ‘what’s the use?’ allowed Woolf to throw not just the purpose of writing, but to throw *the purpose of life* up as a question—to ask about the point of anything by asking about the point of something. [emphasis added] (p. 3)

Similarly, asking what’s the use of assessment allows us to grapple with larger questions about literacies, learning, curriculum, and teaching and the urgency and potential of undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment.

In this conceptual paper, we utilize two methods. Drawing on Ahmed (2019), we follow assessment around as it has been explored in the *Re-imagining Literacies Assessment* project: in literacies research in classrooms with young children (Burnett, 2023), in a Cree language immersion program in Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN, 2023), in anti-racist creative writing classrooms (Chavez, 2023), and in research in reading instruction and assessment (Cummins, 2024). We are also drawing on concept as method, thinking with the concepts of *undoing*, *decolonizing*, *liberating*, and *righting* assessment to engage with the pressing urgency we feel and the potential we know is possible. In following assessment-in-use in examples of research and pedagogy aimed at undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment, we pose two questions:

1. What is urgent? What needs our urgent attention/intention as literacies educators and researchers?
2. What potential emerges for realizing more equitable, inclusive, and diverse literacies education in/through undoing, decolonizing, liberating, righting assessment?

In keeping with our larger goal of mobilizing research and knowledge to re-imagine literacies assessment, the purpose of this paper is to add to national and international conversations about literacies in turbulent times, contributing examples from research and pedagogy to propose critically urgent and emergent questions, practices, and possibilities for students and teachers.

What's the Use? Following Assessment Around

Ahmed (2019) explains that asking about the use of *anything* and *something* requires following it around as a method “to ask not only how it acquires the status of a concept in philosophy but how that word is exercised, rather like a muscle, in everyday life” (p. 3). For the purpose of the project, we defined assessment as it is exercised in education quite broadly—as encompassing the entanglement of tools, policies, and practices for various purposes and processes—diagnostic, formative, and summative; commercial, provincial, divisional, and teacher-created; grading and reporting, sorting and allocating. Included in the concept of assessment is the understanding that assessment is never neutral. Assessment reflects what is perceived to be of value and importance in society and how things work (e.g., models of scarcity, individual competition). Across various levels, timescales, and spaces, assessment has profound social, material, and discursive implications.

How assessment is “exercised” and put to use “in everyday life”—and what implications that has and for whom—was what we wanted to learn by following assessment around. What happens when assessment is “put into active use” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 3)? By thinking “about where [assessment] go[es], how [assessment] acquire[s] associations, and in what or whom [assessment] [is] found” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 3), how might we utilize research for change? In that same spirit, it becomes useful to take the expansive definition of literacies from the LLRC/ACCLL position statement (2023) and follow it around to ask, how do “people make meaning and use language (written and multimodal)” —for what purposes? In what forms? Within and across what different “linguistic spheres and sociocultural and material conditions” (LLRC/ACCLL, 2023)? Putting our interests in assessment-in-active-use and literacies-in-active-use together, we can ask: to what extent does assessment understand literacy in the broad and situational ways the LLRC/ACCLL position statement describes? How might assessment need to be re-imagined for literacy to be realized in those ways?

Ahmed’s (2019) method of following words is “to go where they go: that is the point” (p. 5). By following *use*, Ahmed (2019) ended up “following things” (p. 5)—paths, books, and bags showing various degrees of use, for instance—and telling stories about those things (p. 7). In research and in pedagogy, stories open possibilities to explore within them all kinds of relations and connections. As Ahmed (2019) illustrates, in those relations it is then possible to begin teasing out complications and generating questions (e.g., “Who gets to use what? How does something become available to use?” [p. 7]). As we have learned in this project, one question “leads to others” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 7). New leads emerge for us to follow—and with them, more stories, relations, complications, and questions. The research process is emergent, as is what can be learned along the way for us as educators and researchers, and the actions we take as a result.

As Ahmed (2019) reminds us, our stories matter in this method, too. Following assessment-in-use to what is urgent and emergent is an invitation to share our own stories of assessment—where assessment causes us to throw up our hands in exasperation or admit our shaken confidence to a friend (Ahmed, 2019). As literacies educators, teacher educators, and researchers, “what’s the use?” acknowledges the challenges we feel and face, while committing to finding a better use. “What’s the use?” is a question of purpose. Following use around is a method of hope. In undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment, we grapple with difficulties, tensions, and slipperiness in our stories, inquiries, and research. These are crucial to understanding the complexity of active and everyday use and the research and change—the urgency and emergence—that is needed. In literacies research and practice, educators’ stories are the counterstories to universal, autonomous, and decontextualized approaches to literacy instruction and assessment: they draw our attention to how literacies emerge through bodies, things, and affect (Leander & Boldt, 2013); through everyday activities (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020); in and through the ephemeral and material (Burnett & Merchant, 2020); through multilingual and polysemiotic practices (Canagarajah, 2018); and as relational and interconnected (Battiste, 2010; Styres, 2017).

As a method, “What’s the use?” points us to intention and attention. What is the purpose of assessment? What is its/our intentions? What gets our attention in assessment (and what doesn’t)? “What’s the use?” is a critical question, drawing our attention to power. It’s a relational question, helping us see how all assessment is—whether we notice it or not—deeply emplaced in material, social, and affective relations (Honeyford & Yaman Ntelioglou, 2021). It’s also a pedagogical question, prompting us to intentionally notice the (un)expected and emergent within our classrooms. In the next section, we first explore the concepts of undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting before bringing them into conversation as three assemblings (Ahmed, 2019) where we ask what is the use of assessment in relation to noticing, positioning, and dis/re/connecting.

Undoing, Decolonizing, Liberating, and Righting: Concepts for Thinking About the Use of Assessment

When we designed *Re-Imagining Literacies Assessment* with the aim to mobilize assessment theory, research and practice, we chose to frame a series of webinars, podcasts, and in-practice reflection papers around four verbs as a reminder that these processes demand ongoing action and advocacy (see Table 2). These same verbs that organized the structure of the knowledge mobilization series become, in this paper, concepts to use in thinking through the *use* of assessment, especially when we now put these concepts into assemblings of conversations with one another.

Table 2

Re-Imagining Concepts: Thinking About the Use of Assessment

<p><i>Undoing</i> assessment highlights how many contemporary assessment practices work to disenfranchise and fail learners, families, and teachers, not least when they materialize as data wrangled for accountability.</p> <p><i>Re-Imagining's Use of Undoing:</i> We followed the ways in which Cathy Burnett shared classroom examples to re-imagine assessment as a tripartite process that combines: a generous intention to illuminate what children know and can do; with critical reflection on how educational practices enable or constrain that knowing and doing; and a reflexive and critical awareness of the contribution of people, things, histories, and spaces to what we notice about—or deem relevant to—children's literacies.</p>
<p><i>Decolonizing</i> assessment recognizes Indigenous language, culture, and education rights “that must be translated into policy and practice in all public forms of education” (Battiste, 2017, p. x-xi).</p> <p><i>Re-Imagining's Use of Decolonizing:</i> Specific examples from the community's efforts to revitalize the Cree language in Nursery-Gr 6 curriculum through Nehinaw epistemologies and ontologies were shared through the findings and reflections from a longitudinal community-engaged study that examines the experiences of students, teachers, parents and Knowledge-Keepers in the Cree-Immersion Program in Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN).</p>
<p><i>Liberating</i> assessment challenges educators to acknowledge the deeply political, historical, and racialized nature of literacy practices; to deconstruct bias, design democratic learning spaces, empower students of diverse backgrounds to exercise voice, and embolden students to become self-advocates in globalized communities (Chavez, 2021, p. 8).</p> <p><i>Re-Imagining's Use of Liberating:</i> Felicia Rose Chavez drew upon her experiences shaping “a pedagogy of deep listening” (Chavez, 2021, p. 55) through an anti-racist writing workshop model that shifts power to writers to solicit and give permission for the feedback they most need. This process re-imagines assessment as a possibility to value, trust, and amplify voices that have been silenced in traditional pedagogical and assessment practices.</p>
<p><i>Righting</i> assessment mobilizes research in bilingual and multilingual contexts to challenge monolingual, one-size-fits-all approaches to language and literacy assessment and education, including movements for intensive stand-alone phonics instruction.</p> <p><i>Re-Imagining's Use of Righting:</i> Jim Cummins explored the need to support educators in engaging students' multilingual repertoires; connecting with students' lives and the knowledges, cultures, and languages of their communities; and changing the power dynamics within the classroom to affirm students' identities and enable them to use their multilingual competencies to carry out powerful intellectual and creative academic work.</p>

Note: Adapted from summaries provided by speakers Cathy Burnett (Undoing), Burcu Yaman Ntelioglou et al. (Decolonizing), Felicia Rose Chavez (Liberating), and Jim Cummins (Righting).

The project has generated an archive that continues to grow. In this paper, we focus primarily on the series of four published podcasts that were produced, putting them into

conversation with one another in multiple ways to generate assemblings of stories, relations, complications, and questions (Ahmed, 2019). Through the three assemblings, we consider what is urgent and emergent in assessment in relation to how/what/in what ways assessment notices/recognizes (and doesn't), positions, and dis/re/connects.

What's the Use? Assessment and Noticing

Our *Re-Imagining* speakers drew attention to and prompted questions about how assessment can be used as a process of (in)attention and (mis)recognition. They prompted us to articulate questions about noticing: How does assessment become a lens for what we see and value as literacy (and what we do not)? How can assessment frame the limits of where and how we pay attention to what students are doing and not doing—and which of those doings and not-doings we consider to be literacy? By limiting the area of focus by creating a frame, what do we miss beyond it? What moments might too quickly appear and disappear, or get missed, if assessment too rigidly focuses our attention and intention in a fixed direction? What other ways of noticing might we need to learn if we want assessment to become a way to recognize the stories, voices, and agency of learners that might otherwise be overlooked or intentionally erased?

In the first podcast of the RLA series, Burnett (2023) explained that assessment functions as “a way of describing what literacy (or learning of any kind) is...particular things, habits, behaviours, knowledge” (6:24). The flip side is that “as soon as we start to describe and label, we inevitably miss stuff” (7:02). Being aware of the consequences of what is noticed/valued as literacy in assessments and what isn't is critical—and seems particularly relevant in a special issue that explores the LLRC Position Statement (2023). Even more broad and situational ways to name and describe literacy education can create inevitable tensions, for “as we pin that down, we notice those things and we bring certain frameworks to what is possible to notice in a classroom—and what we miss are things that we can't notice” (Burnett, 2023, 8:43).

Likewise, Cummins (2024b) warned about what gets lost when we look at “literacy development only from the point of view of a cognitive process that takes place within the individual head of the child” (10:42). He explained:

If literacy is focused just on learning decoding skills and being able to read in the sense of decoding the text, that's fine, but that doesn't translate directly into reading comprehension, it doesn't translate directly into vocabulary development, it doesn't translate into a lot of the things that we associate with the development of strong literacy skills. (4:26)

Instead, Cummins argued that we also “need to look at the affective dimension” (4:48) and notice the emotional connections that motivate learners, develop their engagement with books, and “focus on writing as a way of expressing their meaning” (5:28). He suggested that “a lot of literacy development will take care of itself as students engage actively with literacy and see themselves as readers and writers” (5:48).

While it is understandable why some educators and the wider community seek out the “certainty” of assessments that demonstrate students' abilities to crack the code of the phonological systems of language (or at least how they can crack the code of the words on

the test), bigger questions remain: What are students decoding for? What does breaking the code allow people to access? In what ways does literacy increase individuals' and communities' social and political agency? Why is access to literacy in "different linguistic spheres and sociocultural and material conditions" (LLRC Position Statement, 2023, Para. 1) such an important right for all? Focusing on the roots of critical literacy, Cummins (2024b) invited us to notice how Paulo Freire's work with rural peasants in Brazil "was seen not just as a cognitive exercise; it was seen as a social exercise to develop literacy as a way to develop broader freedom of thought, broader engagement with the society" (9:30). Cummins noted that Freire was imprisoned for several months because of how those in power "saw very clearly that literacy could be dangerous" (9:53), concluding that "we've always known that literacy is embedded in power relationships, but when we look at that difference between an individualistic orientation and more social orientation of literacy, again, it's not a case of either or; it's a case of both and" (10:07). The "both and" approach to literacy assessments that prompt educators to look with purposeful urgency at both individual and social orientations to literacy-in-use can feel more dangerous to those closely guarding who they will accept as "literate" decoders and reproducers. While certain standardized assessments can keep controlled attention on the word alone, other assessment practices invite world-noticing (Freire & Slover, 1983), which is far more unpredictable and potentially more empowering.

Educators who choose assessment practices that enable more intentional noticing of the social, cultural, political, and affective dimensions of literacy create more opportunities for decolonizing and liberating to happen within and beyond school contexts. Marlene Ross, one of the educators from OCN, described that, within her Cree-immersion context, she seeks opportunities to invite her learners into multisensory noticings of their relationships with all that is around them: "I'll take them outside and say can you smell the snow coming? Can you smell the rain? That's connecting them to the Land" (OCN, 2023, 9:55). She told a story about taking her students onto the Land to pick medicines, such as sweet grass. She explained that by getting to know the plant in an experiential way, they then can better notice how the roots of the words are connected to what they have seen, smelled, tasted, and felt. This in turn shapes a more holistic way to approach assessment: "When we bring them back to the classroom, the assessment that I use is that they understand that plant—they know the smell of it, they know the description, how to describe it, they know what it's used for, and so all those words are associated with just that one root" (10:40).

Chavez (2023) described her efforts to design anti-racist writing workshops that shift to students more of the agency that comes through the noticing of their individual and collective stories, and the recognition of what they most need to come (back) to the page. She has created a process where writers themselves (rather than teachers or peer reviewers) are the ones who determine and consent to the direction of the feedback that they need to achieve their goals and vision. She explained that this process, which flips who usually holds the power in the writing assessment process, is about establishing and honoring

Human to human connection: I see you; I hear you; you exist. There's power in that. So often, people of colour are erased from our classrooms. Every one of us is an embodied individual with a name and a writing legacy. (Chavez, 2023, 8:11)

Chavez described assessment as being about discovery, allowing students to reflect on and articulate their own “engagement, understanding, and growth” (Chavez, 2021, p. 169). But this human-to-human work of truly seeing and listening to one another, Chavez (2023) warned, looks and feels different than the pedagogical and assessment practices that many of us have inherited. Liberating assessment from definitions of success “based on implicit bias” (Chavez, 2021, p. 169) is often resisted, and those continuing to make spaces for anti-racist work can often feel exhausted and isolated. Chavez (2023) challenged educators to notice what is needed to sustain the roots of anti-racist literacy practices:

I picture it like a tree. Administrators, students, ourselves included, conference attendees—they want to see the fruit of the tree. They want to see the beautiful leaves—here’s all that we’ve done in terms of anti-racist pedagogy or anti-racist work. But I’m more interested in the root system underneath. What is sustaining that work? We spend so much time articulating what we want, but what do we need to make that happen? That’s going to be different for each person. ...It’s a good exercise to name the fruits. Name them. Draw your leaves and your foliage but go deeper underneath them. What are you going to need over the sustained period of time while you are attempting this work? What’s going to feed you? (16:00)

This kind of reflective assessment of ourselves as educators can also become a catalyst to notice reflective assessment practices for students to assess what they need over sustained periods of time to engage in literacy practices that deeply matter for themselves and to their wider communities.

What’s the Use? Assessment and Positioning

Undoing assessment, suggested Burnett (2023), first begins with thinking about what assessment *does*, and, in turn, “what *education* does to teachers, children, knowledge that raises important questions for us as educators” (3:22). In this assembling, we continue to take a critical stance of assessment-in-use, asking questions arising in relationship to power and positioning: In what ways does assessment (and education) position teachers, children, and knowledge? And how does that positioning contribute to our understandings of, access to, and relationships with literacy, language, pedagogy, and one another? How do teachers and, especially, children come to feel and be as a result of this positioning?

In education, tests have long been used to make judgments about intelligence and ability; as Cummins (2024a) demonstrated, in the history of assessment there is a “legacy of eugenics, racism, educational malpractice and ‘scientific rationalization,’” (slide 4) and “we don’t have to go back too far to see some major abuses of assessment” and how assessments “have been used to disempower and exclude diverse groups from educational opportunity” (21:47). In the current Canadian context, the claim that all children and their learning can be well served by an “objective” screening assessment for challenges in word-reading accuracy and fluency (OHRC, 2022), as Cummins (2024a) pointed out, ignores knowledge of the cultural bias of standardized assessments and subjectivity of norms and criteria (Ravitch, 2013); ignores questions about the validity of a test that assesses reading in a language students have not yet learned or had access to; ignores the diverse linguistic knowledge that young children have that would provide a more accurate and fuller understanding of children’s literacies repertoires; and ignores research that has shown that teachers’ assessments of phonics progression are just as, or more, reliable and sensitive

than standardized measures (Duff et al., 2015). That provinces and school divisions are announcing plans to move ahead with screening tests, argued Cummins (2024a), raises critical questions about positioning: what is it about the number/level determined by a test that continues to have so much power, despite its flaws? Why is the investment being made in a test (Ministry of Education, Ontario 2024) rather than in teachers, given that they can assess equally as well or better? Given the limitations of one-size-fits-all screening tests (Cummins, 2024a), how will the results of such an assessment be used? What will it *do* to children (Burnett, 2023)? Will all children have access to the opportunities they need to develop language awareness and literacy engagement in language- and literacy-rich environments (Cummins, 2024b)? Will all students have access to the high quality, differentiated language and literacy instruction to which they have a right (Cummins, 2024b)?

How assessment positions children in particular ways has implications for how children come to see themselves—reduced, almost, to the “set of results you represent” (Burnett, 2023, 4:27). It’s critical to understand the impact this has on children from their perspective:

[you] find yourself in a position where that’s the only kind of relationship you have with education and wound up in that is how you feel about yourself—what assessment does in education and how it allows you to be. (Burnett, 2023, 4:30)

For Chavez (2023), undoing assessment begins with students coming to “understand their own relationship to writing or to being a student” (10:48). In university writing courses with many first-generation students and writers of colour, Chavez (2023) explained how she invites writers to

spend time in a state of freewriting where they have an opportunity to release the weight of what they carry at least based on what they’ve been told about their own ability to write, their ability to read...whether they’re good or bad. (10:57)

Setting down the weight of our personal experiences with literacy and examining what messages we have been told about our abilities to read, write, and what is deemed good or bad—and who gets to deem what is considered good or bad—can also become a provocation to explore larger systemic forces at play. Chavez (2023) encouraged teachers and students to “root out traditions of domination and control that we think equates with authority in the classroom” (8:33) so that we can recognize that much of that authority comes from replicating inherited “aesthetic preferences” (8:46) that are carefully guarded in the white literary canon and that suppress centuries of knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of writers of colour. Critical to liberating assessment is diversifying the canon of writers and texts that are the authorities of good writing in our classrooms.

In an anti-racist model of writing assessment, writers are re-positioned with agency and voice. As Chavez (2023) described, they learn how “to articulate a project idea and reflect on that project” (12:25): to come to a workshop with their writing and communicate their goals, progress, and questions they have for feedback that will help them in moving forward. The value of this process extends beyond writing classrooms as students learn leadership skills in coming “to the table with their own agenda” and leading “conversations about their work” (Chavez, 2023, 12:59). The Critical Response Process (Lerman & Borstel, 2003) *undoes* assessment as *done to* students, a passive process of silently

“receiving critique and then embodying the shame that often results from those exchanges” (Chavez, 2023, 13:07). Writers leave with direction and excitement to go back to the work, in a powerful example of repositioning assessment as “developing a shared understanding of where we go to” (Burnett, 2023, 5:19).

But Burnett’s (2023) questions about what assessment does to teachers are also critical. As Chavez (2023) argued, educators have inherited systems of power and oppression that are replicated if they are not actively noticed (as discussed earlier) and worked against. In workshops with educators, Chavez (2023) described how this process also begins with reflection, asking teachers, “how were you taught to read and write?”; “in what ways do you replicate some of the ways you were taught to read and write?”; and “who is your ideal student and why?” (13:26). Such questions are important to “really thinking about all that we’ve inherited as educators and perhaps even replicating in terms of teaching strategies” (13:40). From there, Chavez (2023) explained, it’s possible to begin “discovering choices for change,” acknowledging that risk and fear are part of any process of change: “Are we willing to risk change? Can you be fully transparent with yourself about your fear?” (13:48). As Chavez (2023) described:

When we ease into that, it’s like a key to a door, and we’re able to talk very openly with each other—here’s what worries me, here’s what prevents me, here’s what scares me about doing these things. ...I think that’s our first obstacle, our first hurdle, and then we can work backward from there—really thinking what we’ve inherited, what we’re replicating, what we envision, and what we want to build toward. (13:57)

As the educators and community members from OCN (2023) described, decolonizing assessment began with acknowledging the need to use their own paradigm for teaching and learning. They were using “Indigegogy” to signal that repositioning, to Indigenize teaching and learning through the Cree language and through Land-based learning, “showing the young people who they are as Ininiwak” (11:46) and where they are from. As one of the educators described:

For these students, I want them to be able to see Cree, sleep Cree, think Cree, speak it. If they can see the language, then they’ll begin to see themselves, who they are as Ininiwak, as Swampy Cree people and they’ll be able to see themselves in colour and they’ll be able to walk in pride that they can walk anywhere on Mother Earth and be OK, and say yeah, I’m Ininiwak. That’s what...I want for the kids. (OCN, 2023, 19:38)

What’s the Use? Assessment and Dis/Re/Connecting

In different ways, *disconnection* was a focus in each of the stories that began the undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment podcasts. Burnett (2023) began *Undoing Assessment* by describing how weekly tests were given in every subject in her grammar school in England—and how their results were announced to all students: “My abiding memory of being at school was sitting tests and being given the results of those tests” (0:59). School was about reproducing “stuff” on tests; “I didn’t really think about anything” (1:39). Cummins began with a story also revisiting his experiences as a student—but in Ireland, contrasting how he learned Irish in an immersion program

(between the ages of 5-8) and how Irish was taught as a subject, for 45-minutes a day, in the (non-immersion) school he attended for the next 10 years. Cummins (2024b) reflected on memories of speaking Irish with his friends on the bus on the way home from school towards the end of his first year in the immersion program, but how learning Irish as a subject was focused solely on grammar and syntax, “not on communication. There was no communicating for context. We learned vocabulary out of context, we learned grammar out of context” (3:44). Cummins (2024b) noted that while he did well on examinations, “I was a lot more fluent at the age of 8 than I was at the age of 18” (3:57).

Chavez’s (2023) story of assessment revisited her early teaching experience as a graduate student Teaching Assistant for several sections of a university writing course. She recalled how the message to instructors was clear: that they should “prepare these students to succeed moving forward” (1:01). As an instructor, writer, and scholar of colour teaching mostly students of colour, Chavez (2023) explained that she created a course committed to “building [students’] confidence on the page” (1:40)—a pedagogy of writing that was about learning “to turn inward, to reflect on themselves and their intuition and really trust that voice, reigniting their passion—what are they interested in? who do they love?” (1:25). Chavez (2023) recounted how the pushback she received illuminated the dominance of white epistemological and pedagogical frameworks: “I wasn’t preparing them for success because I wasn’t introducing them to these more canonical white authors, I wasn’t preparing them for success because I wasn’t drilling them on their thesis-driven essay” (2:13).

The *Decolonizing Assessment* podcast opens with Ross recalling her memories of learning on her father’s trapline and fish camp, living off the Land (OCN, 2023). With emotion, Ross explained how everything changed when the Indian agents came to the camp and told her parents “that I needed to go to school, to the white school” (OCN, 2023, 0:33). Ross explained how she had to move to town, live with her granny, and learn English or be forced to stand in the corner. “I’m not speaking Cree no more” she told her granny, “I’m not going to that corner no more” (1:48). Ross followed her story to the next generation, to students who are the age she was when she was sent away to school that continue to be impacted by the intergenerational effects of the loss of their language and connection to the Land due to Indian residential and day schools (TRC, 2015). “There’s a lot of disconnection,” observed Ross, “they’re lost” (OCN, 2023, 4:16).

With these narratives, our attention is drawn to the urgency of addressing the deep disconnection in language and literacy education. In Burnett’s (2023) and Chavez’s (2023) narratives, there is urgency to disrupt assessment and pedagogies whose purpose is to reproduce the status quo—to hold up particular voices/knowledge/forms in the curriculum (e.g., reading white canonical texts), in pedagogy (e.g., teaching writing as re-writing those texts/voices in particular forms), and in assessment (e.g., re-producing given knowledge in prescribed ways and ranking individuals accordingly). As Chavez (2023) explored, defining success as what or how (white) others say or write creates an epistemological and ontological break—a profound disconnection and even erasure for students of colour in our classrooms (i.e., “Here’s how Hemingway does it on the page, now be Hemingway. That’s usually the trajectory” [11:34]). Chavez explained that the sense of

displacement/dislocation students of colour may feel in higher education or creative classrooms is not imagined; it is built in. Racism is embedded in our educational institutions. As Chavez reminds writers of colour in her teaching: “these spaces were not made for us, they were never intended for us” (17:41).

As the educators from OCN (2023) argued, what they have learned through the Cree language immersion program is that Indigenizing education is a necessary part of decolonizing it: “Bringing the language back home, lifting it up and teaching the children their language is giving them back who they are” (4:22). Indigenizing education focuses on reconnecting children to their Indigenous roots. As Ross described in a powerful image, “When we go out on the Land we talk about how we are connected” (9:42) and when children sometimes lie on the ground, she thinks about how “they have blood memories, and they’re getting themselves grounded and feeling that connection with Mother Earth” (OCN, 2023, 10:12). That sacred sense of connection is evident in the Cree language, where “even the words are in families....the words don’t exist in isolation” (14:36). Building more family connections within schools, the community is focusing on restoring intergenerational relationships through Elders going into classrooms:

they have that connection and a lot of the students will call our Elders *Kookum*, which in our Cree term, is grandmother. And they have that bond that they have and learning how to converse in Cree that’s very special for them and I think that strategy works well within our classroom setting, along with the teacher working with the Elders. (OCN, 2023, 8:05)

Through these (re)connections to language, Land, and the love of Elders, more students are being invited into the wisdom: “Don’t forget where you’re from but also who you are...that’s the root of being a Cree individual, not to forget where [you] come from” (OCN, 2023, 19:24).

Concluding Propositions: Re-Imagining the Uses of Literacies Assessment

What’s the use? As Ahmed points out, “so much is reproduced by the requirement to follow” (2019, p. 212). Assessment, it seems, provides very few options but to follow. The terms have been set. The structures have been created. Tests arrive and we must give them. Report card boxes are empty and we require numbers to fill them. Expectations have been set and we have to meet them.

So what’s the use of questioning where we are going? Of listening to the nagging doubts that we might be on the wrong path? Of paying close attention to the obstacles we find ourselves navigating? As Chavez (2023) reminded us, it can be scary to voice our concerns, to consider stepping off the “well-trodden path” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 212) or throwing out the authoritative guidebook. It can seem counterintuitive to look back before we move forward, to listen to other voices, to take the risk of doing things differently. But as Burnett (2023) suggested, “These things that we keep tripping over—[the] really difficult, thorny places” of assessment “can become really generative if we think, how else could those be?” (19:55). In conclusion we propose four uses for undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment.

1. *To slow down and look together at moments that seem to matter—undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment so it can be used to notice new possibilities and potential.*

While slowing down and urgency may not intuitively seem to align, to see new possibilities and potential in assessment there is a need for time, space, and opportunities for educators to collaborate. In these turbulent times, there is an urgency in trusting teachers “to use their professional discernment to make decisions about what to teach and how to teach” (LLRC/ACCLL) and to enact literacy pedagogies that are asset-based, equity-oriented, inclusive, decolonizing, “plurilingual and anti-racist” (LLRC/ACCLL). Burnett (2023) expressed the confidence she feels in trusting teachers to notice literacies-in-use:

I’ve got real hope for what teachers do—of all the things that happen over and above the lesson or underneath the lesson...[there] is always potential, another side of potential. Where classrooms are working in ways that are enabling and exciting, teachers are part of that. (20:30)

Urgency also focuses our attention in different ways. Urgency is an attentiveness to using time with purpose and making decisions intentionally about how to spend time (Routman, 2018)—for example, to change course, slow down, or abandon a lesson—with a larger goal or emergent moment in mind. As Burnett (2023) described:

We might develop a mood of enchantment, when we’re transfixed by something that’s happening, something that’s maybe unexpected or overwhelming and we have that sense of being caught up in the moment. In teaching, caught up in the moment, moments that seem to matter. They might not be in completion of the task, or the thing we’ve gone in to do with children, but they’re when stories open up or we gain insights into children’s lives. (21:16)

There is an important use to the kinds of assessment practices that allow teachers and students to slow things down and to notice and reflect on what emerges from those moments.

2. *To describe together what language/literacy learning looks/feels/is like—undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment so it can be used to establish and sustain curiosity, enjoyment, and engagement.*

In rich and vivid description, Cummins (2024b) invited educators to imagine a scenario—the first day of kindergarten. Educators and parents alike can imagine four- and five-year old students coming into the classroom uncertain, not knowing each other, or the teacher, or even what school is about. He then described how literacy becomes an entry point for the kinds of shared meaning-making that occurs “long before the kids have any notion of decoding skills” (18:26):

One of the things that ideally the teacher might do is sit down in a circle on a mat and take out a big book and read a story to them. And so, she’s pointing to vocabulary, and using the pictures to develop kids’ vocabulary and develop their comprehension of the story, she’s dramatizing what she’s reading. She may even get into pre-teaching reading strategies. . . Or she may say to the kids, “Okay, let’s all stop now and close our eyes and let’s see in our minds. Let’s visualize what’s happening in the story.” (Cummins, 2024b, 17:39)

Noticing and naming both the complexity of the pedagogical moves to support emerging literacy and the simplicity of connecting through a shared moment on a carpet provides ways to assess the affective and social dimensions of literacy. As Cummins (2024b) explains:

This is what reading engagement looks like. They are sharing a story, getting engaged with the story collectively and they'll want to pick up that book, drama, look at the pictures, relive that story, and so you form a community focused on enjoying stories, enjoying print, expanding students' curiosity, and so you can establish that connection and sustain it. (18:30)

Within the relationship between valuing what we assess and assessing what we value, the stories we tell about engaging literacy learners and enjoying learning matters. It expands the use of literacy to how it builds community and invites imagination.

3. *To recognize language and literacy as always more—undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment so it can be used to open/realize new directions/possibilities.*

Burnett (2023) challenged educators to accept that assessment of literacies will always be partial and incomplete. While we can hope to be expansive in what we are opening ourselves to see, hear, feel, and understand as literacies-in-use, she also implored educators to be open to

holding on to that idea that there is always more that's going on than what we think is going on, and trying to create those atmospheres or opportunities or possibilities for new directions to be followed—whether that's a story that's going to be written or an image that's going to be created or collage that's going to be constructed, try to go and move with those possibilities—seems to be a way of moving forward. (22:13)

Assessment needs to be understood as shape-shifting and space-making, moving with and toward the surprising and unexpected, encouraging more questions than answers, and inspiring teachers and learners to move beyond what is already established.

4. *To realize relationships and responsibility—undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting assessment so it can be used to respect relationality, heal and empower, rally and resist.*

Dr. Stanley Wilson, an Elder from OCN, shared a teaching that he has offered his own great-grandchild:

I tell my great-grandson to go up to a tree and I say, "You have a relationship to the tree. We breathe in fresh air and we breathe out dirty air. The tree takes that dirty air and gives us back the fresh air so that's the relationship we have with the tree." That's one example of relationality. We are in relationship with everything and we have to respect that relationship. (OCN, 2023, 12:31)

Like the relationships between the tree, the human, and the air, the relationships between students, teachers, knowledge, ways of being, and assessment are inextricably linked. In that, we find both a sense of deep responsibility and the possibility for needed change. As Chavez reflected, "anti-racism necessitates action.... We have to face head on what we need

to heal from” (20:03). Chavez urges educators to rally together: “Now more than ever, I believe it’s our responsibility to push back with that public voice. The more we rally and resist, the more resilient we become and the more resilience breeds power, community breeds power, volume breeds power” (Chavez, 2023, 17:58).

Amid polarizing debates, there is much wisdom in heeding Chavez’s (2023) advice “that we look back and listen before we move forward” (18:26). We feel tremendous urgency to re-imagine literacies assessment if we hope to realize more just, equitable, anti-oppressive practices and policy in language and literacies education. The research, theory, and pedagogy mobilized through this project makes a critical contribution to national and international conversations and to undoing, decolonizing, liberating, and righting the fullest opportunities and possibilities for students and teachers.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2019). *What’s the use? On the uses of use*. Duke University Press.
- Honeyford, M., Watt, J., & Yaman Ntelioglou, B. (2023). *Re-imagining curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in language and literacies education*. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Connection Grant.
- Honeyford, M., Warkentin, S., & Costa, K. (2022). Perplexities and possibilities in literacy curriculum & pedagogical change: A research partnership and experiment in materialist methodologies. In C. Lee, C. Bailey, C. Burnett, & J. Rowsell (Eds.), *Unsettling literacies: Directions for literacy research in precarious times* (pp. 147-163). Springer.
- Honeyford, M., & Yaman Ntelioglou, B. (2021). Beyond “trying to find a number”: Proposing a relational ontology for reconceptualizing assessment in K-12 language and literacy classrooms. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 77(4), 427-446. <https://doi.org/10.3138/CMLR-2020-0098>
- Battiste, M. (2010). Nourishing the learning spirit. *Education Canada*, 50(1), 13-18. Canadian Education Association. Available from: <https://www.edcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/EdCan-2010-v50-n1-Battiste.pdf>
- Battiste, M. (2017). Forward, in F. Piribhai-Illich, S. Pete, & F. Martin, *Culturally responsive pedagogy: Working towards decolonization, indigeneity and interculturalism* (pp. vii-xi). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burnett, C., (Guest Host) & King, D. (E.P.). (2023, Oct.). Undoing assessment with Cathy Burnett. [Audio podcast episode]. In *Re-imagining Literacies Assessment*. <https://reimagininglitassessment.ca/>
- Burnett, C., & Merchant, G. (2020). *Undoing the digital: Sociomaterialism and literacy education*. Routledge.
- Canagarajah, S. (2018). Translingual practice as spatial repertoires: Expanding the paradigm beyond structuralist orientations. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 31-54. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx041>
- Chavez, F. R., (Guest Host) & King, D. (E.P.). (2023, Dec.). Liberating assessment with Felicia Rose Chavez. Chavez, F. R. (Guest). In *Re-imagining Literacies Assessment*. <https://reimagininglitassessment.ca/>
- Chavez, F. R. (2021) *The anti-racist writing workshop: How to decolonize the creative classroom*. Haymarket Books.

- Cummins, J. (2024a, Jan. 24). *Opportunity to learn: A crucial consideration in interpreting assessment and designing instruction* [Webinar]. Re-Imagining Literacies Assessment Series. <https://reimagininglitassessment.ca/>
- Cummins, J., (Guest Host) & King, D. (E.P.) (2024b, Feb.) Righting assessment with Jim Cummins. In *Re-imagining Literacies Assessment*. <https://reimagininglitassessment.ca/>
- Duff, F. J., Mengoni, S. E., Bailey, A. M., & Snowling, M. J. (2015). Validity and sensitivity of the phonics screening check: Implications for practice. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 38(2), 109-123. <https://doi-org.uml.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/1467-9817.12029>
- Freire, P., & Slover, L. (1983). The importance of the act of reading. *The Journal of Education*, 165(1), 5-11.
- Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada. (2023). *Position statement*. <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/g4h9c8jj89ozocl8knscj/Final-LLRC-Position-Statement-2020-2021-May.pdf?rlkey=lh9lh4o85rwgr53ft7fs29kfh&e=1&dl=0>
- Leander, K., & Boldt, G. (2013). Rereading “A pedagogy of multiliteracies”: Bodies, text, and emergence. *Journal of Literacy Research* 45(1), 22-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X12468587>
- Lerman, L., & Borstel, J. (2003). *Liz Lerman’s critical response process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*. Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.
- Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2024, January 23). Ontario unveils a back-to-basics Kindergarten curriculum [News Release]. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1004097/ontario-unveils-a-back-to-basics-kindergarten-curriculum>
- Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2022). *Right to read: Public inquiry into human rights issues affecting students with reading disabilities*. [Inquiry Report]. Government of Ontario. <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/FINAL%20R2R%20REPORT%20DE SIGNED%20April%2012.pdf>
- Pahl, K., & Roswell, J. (2020). *Living literacies: Literacy for social change*. The MIT Press.
- Ravitch, D. (2013). *The reign of error: The hoax off the privatization movement and the danger to America’s public schools*. Knopf.
- Re-imagining Literacies Assessment* (2023). <https://reimagininglitassessment.ca/about-2/>
- Routman, R. (2018). *Literacy essentials: Engagement, excellence, and equity for all learners*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Styres, S. (2017). *Pathways for remembering and recognizing Indigenous thought in education: Philosophies of Lethi’nihstenha Ohwentsia’kekha (land)*. University of Toronto Press.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume 1: Summary*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers. www.trc.ca
- Yaman Ntelioglou, B., Fontaine, B., Wilson, S., Lathlin-Scott, S., Constant, P., Personius, J., & Ross, M. (Guest Hosts) & King, D. (E.P.). (2023, Nov.). Decolonizing assessment with teachers and community members from

Opaskwayak Cree Nation. In *Re-imagining Literacies Assessment*.
<https://reimagininglitassessment.ca/>

Author Biographies

Michelle Honeyford is an Associate Professor in Language and Literacy in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, where her research is deeply enmeshed in collaborative pedagogical inquiries committed to social justice, equity, diversity, and anti-oppressive practices in curriculum, teaching, and learning. Michelle's work draws upon sociomaterial, transcultural, decolonial, multimodal, and critical theories, with current projects in areas of post-qualitative sociomaterial practitioner inquiry methodologies, place-writing, and assessment. She is the co-founding director of the Manitoba Writing Project.

Jennifer Watt is an Assistant Professor at the University of Manitoba in the Faculty of Education. Her research focuses on the complexities of how literacies contribute to well-being and well-becoming of students, teachers, and communities in and out of schools. In her most recent work, Jen is exploring how critical feminist media literacy education in the K-12 system can interrupt and confront the many ways that gender based sexual violence is promoted, perpetuated, performed, and protected in popular media and society. Jen also frequently collaborates with teachers in Manitoba on place-writing and place-walking research and pedagogical initiatives through her role as Co-Director of the Manitoba Writing Project.