

IQ Testing: A critique for parents of children with developmental disabilities

by Bruce Uditsky

Part one of a three-part critique

One of the most common assessments parents are told they need in order to access funding, supports or services, is an IQ test. Sometimes, IQ tests are demanded with explicit or implicit threats: “Without an IQ test your child will not or might not get the educational supports he or she requires.” Other times there is a plea, almost as if you would be doing them a favour: “It is the government that requires the test and without it we cannot get our funding.”

Often parents feel they must comply, that there is no choice or that going along will lead to a reciprocal cooperation by schools or authorities on other points that are of more importance to parents. I know of no families who, by complying with IQ testing, achieved greater cooperation from authorities or achieved improved services, quality or funding. More often than not, there is a negative effect: “With that IQ score, your child belongs in a segregated class,” or “With that IQ score, you should lower your expectations. We have.”

Parents may choose to cooperate with IQ testing, but with no illusion that consequentially they will gain cooperation on matters important to them. It is perfectly appropriate to choose the right challenges for your family, to conserve energy for future needs and thus at times agree to an IQ test to avoid a struggle. But it is helpful to be aware of the consequences and not assume positive ends will be achieved.

With respect to school, an IQ test cannot be conducted on a student without parental permission. Parents can refuse without much consequence, other than that which comes from challenging authority. School districts are required by law to provide an appropriate education, including the required resources, to all students and this is not dependent on an IQ test or the results of one. While Alberta Education policies reference IQ tests and scores for coding or categorizing, this is at the level of policy—not law—and nowhere does Alberta Education stipulate a child must have an IQ test.

How history impacts current practice

IQ tests claim to do at least two things. One is to accurately measure ‘intelligence’ and second is to do so relative to standard scores (e.g., what the average person would score). Hence individuals are rated as being of average intelligence, more intelligent than average or less. In the field of intelligence testing there have been many debates as to whether these claims are true and if so, to what degree – is there one intelligence or multiple intelligences, are the tests culturally biased, are the tests properly standardized, has the population changed upon which standardization was based, etc. There is less than universal agreement by psychologists on the merits or meaning of IQ tests.

One of the original purposes of IQ tests was to determine or predict which students would require additional help to be successful in school. It then is an interesting question as to how these IQ scores evolved into stigmatizing, categorizing, racially prejudiced and negatively life-defining outcomes for students with developmental disabilities and others. Prior to the advent of IQ tests, “scientists” proposed many other methods for comparing intelligence between individuals, genders, races and ethnic groups. These ranged from measuring the weight of brains, the length of arms and variations in facial features or skulls. Initially these tests were considered accurate measures of what was understood to be universally and irrefutably true. Men were smarter than women and white men were smarter than anyone else. And the story gets worse from here for people with developmental disabilities.

Part 2: The Definitional Challenge

The second part of this article on IQ tests will address their stigmatizing power and their use to determine eligibility for services and supports. In the realm of education, IQ tests are not utilized for educational purposes. This raises serious ethical questions about applying a test that has little utility for educational purposes but great risk for stigmatizing and categorizing children. To be fair there is an advantage for those who score well on an IQ test. If they are having difficulty learning, the assumption is made that the students' learning processes need to be understood and educational strategies applied to help these students become successful. However, if a student scores low on an IQ test and is given the label developmental disability, then other more negative assumptions are too often made. Rather than focus on learning strategies and student strengths schools have too often viewed students with lower IQ scores as not being able to learn and needing to be congregated and segregated—irrespective of the fact no IQ test was ever designed for the purposes of segregating students.

Suppose we imagined a different world, where all children who had difficulty learning were assessed in terms of their learning needs and the strategies that would best help them learn. What if assessing a child produced useful information and what if we assumed we could not predict a student's success, only that we must work to ensure every child has the best chance for success? What if supports for individuals with disabilities were universally available, an entitlement given their equal human value and not tied to categorization based on IQ tests? Imagination is necessary to sustain hope, possibility and a direction for our future efforts.

Developmental disabilities have existed since the dawn of humanity, long before anyone ever thought to define them through an IQ test. What exists today as a definition for developmental disabilities, vis-a-vis IQ scores, was a human invention and we can do better by children with cognitive disabilities. We could, for example, focus on their strengths, gifts, capacities and abilities. Should this not be the basis for considering how we educate children? Moreover should it not be the basis for how educators view children, particularly those who are at greatest risk for being diminished and marginalized given their vulnerabilities?

Nevertheless, while we commit ourselves to constructing an approach to supporting learning and life without parsing individuals by IQ tests, parents are faced with a dilemma: Should they agree to an IQ test or not? When and where is it necessary to determine the presence of a developmental disability, it is possible to use tests that do not result in a single, fixed IQ score. There are an increasing number of psychologists who do not use a fixed IQ score, given the reasons noted above. They can interpret an IQ test and other standardized tests to determine a developmental disability without saddling a child for life with a single devaluing score.

When having a child assessed for a developmental disability, parents should inquire as to what tests will be used and to what ends—in effect, how does the psychologist view IQ tests and scores? Parents carefully choose, for example, their child's physician or dentist and the same consideration should be applied to choosing those who will be testing a child. Parents should not simply accept that the testing of their child be done by professionals unknown to them, who they have not met or had an opportunity to discuss their child with prior to any assessment. Professionals who conduct IQ tests hold different values and like anyone else may have conflicts of interest; for example, the interests of their employers in contrast to the interest of the parents.

The negative labels applied as a consequence of an IQ test are lifelong and in the historical and current context of our society, hurtful and limiting. A lifetime can be spent attempting to counteract the limiting assumptions of a low IQ score and all some people may see is an incapable child rather than a student requiring high expectations and an inclusive life. Better to have someone assess a child

who has as few conflicts of interest as possible, someone whose only interest is the child. Much as the claim will be made the tests are applied objectively irrespective of the tester. Testers are still human, have their own conscious and unconscious values. When working for school systems or governments they cannot avoid inherent conflicts even with their best and honest professional effort.

For more than 20 years now in Alberta, through inclusive post-secondary education, AACL and its allies have constantly and consistently demonstrated the limited utility of IQ tests and scores. When provided with a quality inclusive post-secondary education, students with developmental disabilities never live down to their IQ scores. And there are students who are adults today who have never had an IQ test and more who have never been given a specific score. It is possible to live, have an inclusive education and go on to be eligible for adult supports without ever having an IQ score assigned. However, this could change.

Currently, neither children services, education nor adult services in Alberta requires an IQ score in order to provide supports and services. However, Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD), Alberta Seniors and Community Supports is looking at developing a regulation that would require a certain IQ score in order for an individual to be deemed eligible for services. Anyone who exceeds that IQ score would be deemed ineligible for supports and funding. This might not be an issue of much importance if every person with disabilities had access to the supports they needed irrespective of the nature of their disability. Unfortunately and tragically for some, this is not the case.

For example, two adults with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) may have an essentially similar need for support but one may be ineligible because of a difference in IQ scores. One might have access to comprehensive supports through PDD while the other may only have access to a patchwork of uneven assistance. This makes no sense to families, particularly as all children with disabilities have access to support from Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD) and to an education. No child is denied an education or their family denied support on the basis of an IQ score. And yet while we have universal access for children with disabilities and their families the government is reluctant to create a comparable system for adults (usually because of costs) preferring to look at managing access to adult supports by using an IQ score as a way of limiting who comes through the door.

IQ tests are administered by human beings on other human beings and as such are not 100% reliable or valid. Either the examiner or the person to whom the test is being administered could be having a bad day. In addition some IQ tests score higher than others which would again eliminate some people from needed supports by virtue of what test was used. A difference in a few points on the test results of a child could mean the difference between whether he or she receives needed supports and funding for the entirety of their adult life. The very idea that human beings can be deemed to have a condition or not on the basis of a difference in a few points on a psychological test borders on the absurd and this is compounded when systems choose to use an IQ score as to who is deserving of supports and who is not. Both IQ and intellectual disability are human constructs and from time to time these constructs can be rethought. For example, questions exist today as to what an IQ test actually measures and whether or not there are multiple intelligences. In addition, other are arguing in the literature that the underlying constructs of a developmental disability need to be re-thought.

In the future parents may be forced to have an IQ test administered to their child in order to ensure they may be eligible for services as an adult. This may happen even though an IQ test is not needed to access any childhood service from education to family support to health care and in fact, typically only results in negative perceptions of the child's ability.

Part 3: PDD eligibility requirements raise legal, ethical concerns

Since beginning this three-part series on IQ testing, the Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) Program has implemented a new regulation that limits access on the basis of an IQ score. This action has implications for the decisions parents must make when their child is young, given the potential impact on whether their son or daughter will be able to access PDD supports when he or she is an adult. PDD's new eligibility requirement comes at a time when it appears Alberta Education is moving away from labeling and categorizing children unnecessarily. So while one government department is moving in the right direction, the other moves backwards—always a frustrating experience for families.

As noted in the second part of this series, an IQ test is not required to access educational supports, Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD), health care or, for that matter, any other supports or assistance, including income supports for adults. And while Alberta Education is currently taking new steps to reduce the costs of its educational tests, PDD is requiring testing and developing new ones at a time when it has limited resources and has already reduced some of the more progressive, inclusive and cost-effective options available to families and individuals.

In the near future we may see a situation where one individual is able to access PDD with an IQ score of 70 while another is rejected with a score of 72. IQ tests were never designed to determine eligibility for needed services and to use them as such is highly problematic. These tests are not precise enough to be used to determine, on the basis of a few points, whether one individual should get the supports they need while another should be rejected. IQ scores do not necessarily reflect the level of support someone might need. For example, an individual with a score of 65 might need less support than someone with a score of 75, depending on personal circumstances, individual characteristics and the nature of their

disability. Some studies have shown scores vary significantly (e.g., by as much as five points) between types of IQ tests. In effect, a parent might unknowingly have their child assessed with one test that results in a higher score than another. As a consequence, when that child is an adult she may be denied the supports she needs for the rest of her life. As noted previously there are many other factors that contribute to variability in test scores (e.g., the tester, cultural and ethnic differences, number of times the test is repeated, mood on the day of test).

PDD has also developed its own test to determine eligibility. Universally the definition for a developmental disability requires significant limitations in intellectual ability and two areas of adaptive skills (e.g., cooking, budgeting). These limitations were ordinarily determined by established psychological tests. Now PDD has developed its own test and as it will be administered by PDD, this raises serious conflict of interest issues. No doubt a legal challenge will emerge when someone is denied access to PDD because of a score on a test developed and administered by PDD that has no standing in the research literature.

PDD has developed eligibility guidelines. These guidelines make distinctions between individuals on the basis of IQ scores that favour some individuals while penalizing others. PDD will accept a single IQ test if it is 55 or less but if it is more than 55 and less than 70, they may require a second test, both of which must result in a score of 70 or less. The only reason for adding a second test is to make eligibility more difficult. PDD should accept any single test with a score of 70 or less. IQ scores vary somewhat over time and there is a learning effect; the more times one is tested, the greater likelihood the individual will learn some of the test and score higher. Again, if someone is required to take a second test and is rejected on the basis of one test score, this too will likely end up in a legal challenge.

Families are now faced with a dilemma. An IQ test is not required for any child related services or supports. Many studies have also shown that low IQ scores result in diminished expectations by teachers as well as inviting continuing societal stigmatization. However, to acquire adult supports from PDD, an IQ test will be required (individuals with severe disabilities are not likely to need one). The longer a parent waits the more likely their son or daughter will score higher and a few points difference can have serious implications. One option for parents, assuming cost is not a major barrier, is to have an IQ test done privately or through a university or other clinic, not through a school, and hold onto that confidential information for future consideration as to when and where it might be shared.

There is no easy answer at this time as to what parents should do. However, as AACL believes the use of an IQ test, as criteria for eligibility, is inappropriate we are prepared to assist individuals and families to challenge its use. The ideal solution is for PDD to remove the requirement for an IQ score and for the government to ensure every individual with disabilities receives supports according to need.