

Chapter 9

The Australian Curriculum: Assessment Practices for Diverse Learners

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ABSTRACT

A distinct synergy exists between pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and reporting. The implementation of the new Australian Curriculum F-10 (henceforth abbreviated as “Australian Curriculum”) has provided both opportunities and challenges for ensuring that the needs of diverse learners are strongly addressed within inclusive education settings. This chapter illuminates specific issues related to the comprehensive assessment of diverse learners including national inconsistencies in the provision of accommodations, the use of the general capabilities as a starting point rather than a curriculum adjustment point, and the paucity of resources and professional learning opportunities supporting inclusive assessment practices. Recommendations are provided to demonstrate how educators can achieve effective student-centred assessment practices for diverse learners using the Australian Curriculum across and within different contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Australia’s Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) legally protects the rights of students with disabilities to be taught ‘on the same basis’ as children without disabilities (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992). The Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005) interpret how the DDA can be translated into educational practice for teachers throughout Australia. In 2008, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for

Young Australians (MCEECDYA, 2008) sanctioned a national commitment to ensure inclusivity in all schools, in addition to the promotion of world-class assessment:

Assessment of student progress will be rigorous and comprehensive. It needs to reflect the curriculum, and draw on a combination of the professional judgment of teachers and testing, including national testing (p. 14).

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Assessment should cover all aspects of the curriculum, facilitate learning, identify the strengths and achievements of learners, and be sensitive to an increasingly diverse student population (Ewing, 2010). Nitko and Brookhart (2011, p. 3) consider assessment as “A process for obtaining information that is used for making decisions about students, curricula, programs, and schools; and educational policy”. It is recognised that high-quality assessment, “contributes to improving the individual’s quality of life, by helping teachers to prioritise learning” (Ware & Donnelly, 2004, p. 12). From international tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), through to the individual student level, assessment is critically and intrinsically linked to both teaching and learning. Formative (for learning) and summative (of learning) are the most commonly used assessment types. Formative assessment, introduced by Scriven as ‘formative evaluation’, was originally considered a curriculum improvement strategy as opposed to the more administrative focus of summative assessment (cited in Wiliam, 2011, p.33). Nonetheless, both assessment types are fundamental in guiding and evaluating teaching practice.

The Australian Curriculum is considered to be a flexible three-dimensional curriculum comprising: (a) learning areas, (b) general capabilities, and (c) cross-curriculum priorities (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority: ACARA, 2013a). The learning areas include English, Mathematics, Science, History, and Geography. (five additional learning areas are, at time of press, still awaiting final endorsement). The general capabilities encompass Literacy, Numeracy, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) capability, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social capability, Ethical Behaviour, and Intercultural Understanding. The cross-curriculum priorities incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, and Sustainability. ACARA is responsible for the new

national curriculum; a curriculum that must be accessible and meaningful to all learners due to the legal and social prerogatives attached to inclusive philosophy. This applies to the full range of learners in schools, from the most gifted students to those with very complex needs.

For the purposes of this chapter, ‘diverse learners’ refers to students with intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional, behavioural or learning difficulties. The terms ‘students with special education needs’ and ‘diverse learners’ will be used interchangeably to refer to the aforementioned cohort. In Australia over 150,000 students with a disability attend school, with up to 80% enrolled in mainstream settings where specialist training in the area of special education is not the norm (DEEWR, 2010, as cited by ACARA, 2012a). Ensuring that robust, comprehensive, and fair assessment practices are implemented for this group of students is necessitated by legislation and, with the recent inception of the Australian Curriculum, requires renewed attention from educators, policymakers, and scholars. This chapter profiles the current assessment landscape for students with diverse needs by describing the lead-up to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, followed by an in-depth analysis of four critical issues that influence robust and comprehensive assessment practices for diverse learners. Practical suggestions are put forth to support educators with the intention of demonstrating that truly inclusive practices can be ‘fully experienced’ rather than ‘partially realised’ for educators and students in Australian schools.

BACKGROUND

Special educators have historically been critical of how the needs of their students have been marginally or retrospectively considered by curriculum developers, in regards to both instruction and assessment. This is evident within the familiar adage of the Australian Special Education Prin-

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