An Australian Curriculum that includes diverse learners: the case of students with disability

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Abstract

A curriculum for all, equitable, accessible, and providing consistency for learners across Australia, the Australian Curriculum potentially offered to be a world first for students with disabilities. This paper presents the story of Australia's first official national curriculum particularly focusing on the inclusion of students with disabilities, learning difficulties and the gifted and talented. The paper begins by examining the development and process, decisions and critical documentation of history in relation to the inclusion of students with disabilities within the Australian Curriculum. The paper then turns to look critically at what has been produced, identifying issues, strengths and weaknesses before looking forward and posing some recommendations. If the Australian Curriculum is to be a curriculum for all, documenting the story of inclusive education for students with disabilities is significant in fulfilling the aim of inclusive education and maximizing achievement and quality of life for all young people.

Keywords Students with disability · Australian curriculum · Special education · Inclusive education

Introduction

The central tenet of our paper is that including *all* learners in education, and respecting, valuing and applying diverse knowledges, capabilities and lived experiences as the foundation for learning and achievement is not an option, it is both a legal requirement as well as a prerequisite for a democratic education. We argue that every learner has a diverse range of needs and that the notion of needs is contingent. Therefore, all learners share the right to equitable access and engagement with the official Australian Curriculum that is apparently safeguarded by legislation and international conventions. The enjoyment of this right is challenged in dominant educational practice by entrenched and contentious labelling and categorisation of student diversity, including (but not restricted to), cultural, English as an additional or other language or dialect (EAL/D), gifted and talented, socio-economic status, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, geographic and remote/rural locations, as well as disability. Whilst many of the key points raised in this paper are highly relevant across this diversity of learners, the case in focus is students with disability. Such a focus aims to advocate against such categorisation whereby students with disability continue to be commonly consigned to the 'special educational needs' or 'special needs student' category, which is itself an artefact or administrative tool of the 1970s (Warnock, 1978). We therefore argue that the rationale of Australia's first national curriculum to provide equitable, accessible and consistent curriculum for all learners across Australia (ACARA, 2012a) offered the potential to be a world first for students with disability. In aspiring to be world leaders in national curriculum design, the Australian Curriculum developers had the opportunity to be informed by the principles and practices of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Gordon et al., 2009; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2012), and therefore authentically inclusive of student diversity.

We begin this consideration of the official Australian Curriculum by examining the decisions made and critical

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documentation produced during its development, in particular the silence regarding inclusion of students with disability. The paper then turns to look critically at what has been produced, identifying issues, strengths and weaknesses, before looking forward and posing some recommendations for improvements. The Australian Curriculum is intended to be a curriculum for all, maximising achievement and quality of life for all young people. Documenting the case for students with disability is a significant part of fulfilling this aim.

Silences on education for students with disability in the development of the Australian Curriculum

We begin our discussion by posing the question: does the Australian Curriculum meet the learning needs of students with disability? From the inception of the Australian Curriculum in 2008, students with disability were largely invisible in the early documentation including shaping papers and draft curriculum. Given that international efforts have grappled with how to secure authentically *inclusive* national curricula (Aird & Aird, 2006, 2007; Martin, 2006; Slee, 2011), it has been argued that curriculum content for students with disability 'should have been settled as part of the overarching blueprint for the development of the national curriculum' in Australia (Muskovitis, 2010, p. 51). Lieber et al. (2008) describe how 'making the curriculum accessible after the fact can be time consuming, challenging for the team and beneficial to only a small number of children at a given time or within an activity' (p. 20). Supporting these claims, Orkwis (1999) identifies that 'the practice of making adaptations to an existing curriculum is like adding a wheelchair ramp to an existing building rather than designing the ramp during construction' (cited in Lieber et al., 2008, p. 20). The ramp, like the students who directly benefit from its installation, is the afterthought of a guilty conscience.

Advocates within the field of disability and special education immediately flagged their concerns about the invisibility of students with disability in initial Australian Curriculum documents. These advocates included teachers, educational leaders, parents/carers, national associations such as Australian Special Education Principals Association (ASEPA) and Australian Association of Special Education (AASE), and state-based associations such as the Western Australian Education Support Principals and Administrators Association (WAESPAA) and the South Australian Education Principals' and Leaders' Association (SASEPLA). Advocacy organisations such as Children with Disability Australia also raised their concerns. Over the ensuing years from the initial 2008 release of the Australian Curriculum, national special education/disability conference themes relentlessly called for this silence about students with

disability in the curriculum to be addressed. For example, the ASEPA 'Built in Not Bolted On' Conference in Perth in 2011 challenged key ACARA representatives to respond to this silence. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) gradually responded to such advocacy and committed to ensuring that students with disabilities' learning was taken into account. Subsequently, ACARA commissioned an overarching position paper on inclusive education that went through a series of iterations which were never published or distributed. However, amendments were made to draft curriculum materials and shaping papers (e.g., ACARA, 2011) including overarching statements that addressed student diversity including students with disability. ACARA also began to consult with reference groups including the Equity and Diversity Advisory Group and Students with Disability Advisory Group with representatives from schools, universities, curriculum authorities and professional associations. Additionally, ACARA committed to scoping 'English/International literature which describe recent CAR [curriculum, assessment and reporting] developments for SEN and students with disabilities in settings where an inclusive national curriculum has been operating over time' (Garner et al., 2012, p. 5). Arguably, this scoping would have been better placed prior to the national curriculum design to inform the complex interplay between curriculum and pedagogy as well as to promote the key themes of inclusiveness, appropriateness, consultation, accountability, flexibility and delivery of a trained workforce in curriculum design inclusive of students with disability.

In July 2011, the F–10 curriculum position paper on the whole curriculum, achievement standards and support for students with disability was endorsed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. This was complemented by efforts to include students with disability through drafting a 'Progressing to Foundation' curriculum for students not at Foundation level, which was available for national consultation from 21 September to 1 November 2011. Following this, the *Students with disability: Progressing to Foundation Consultation Report* was published in January 2012 (ACARA, 2012b). This initiative was met with mixed reactions especially from teachers of students with disability, ranging from support for an explicit curriculum for students not yet at Foundation level, through to those who advocated that this separate curriculum challenged the notion of a national curriculum *for all* by excluding some students with disability. This sparked human rights arguments whilst also contradicting the initial paper: *The shape of the Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2009), which stated:

> one important lesson learned from past efforts to overcome inequity is that an alternative curriculum for students who are regarded as disadvantaged does not treat them equitably. It is better to set the same high

expectations for all students and to provide differentiated levels of support to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve those expectations. (p. 8)

Subsequently, the separate Progressing to Foundation curriculum initiative was dismissed.

The focus then shifted to catering for students with disability through the Australian Curriculum general capabilities, in particular, literacy, numeracy, and personal and social capabilities. Subsequently, these capabilities were extended to address students with diverse needs, including students with disability. For example, in the Australian Curriculum version 7.5 the literacy capability continuum was expanded to include subsections in level 1 to address literacy complexities of students with disability that were not evident in the initial 1–6 literacy capability levels. Level 1 was:

divided into five sub-levels – Level 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d and 1e. Levels 1a–1d represent the development of early literacy skills with a particular emphasis on communication. Level 1a begins with unintentional communication progressing to intentional symbolic communication at Level 1d. Level 1e begins to focus on the application of literacy skills. (ACARA, 2015)

The numeracy capability also expanded to include two sub-levels 1a and 1b. Explicit advice was also added for teachers of students with disability including teaching and learning examples in the English, mathematics, science and history learning areas. As the initial shaping papers developed and consultative feedback increased, a growing emphasis on addressing student diversity emerged. For example, the shaping paper version 4.0 (ACARA, 2012a) provided additional advice on how the Australian Curriculum meets the needs of the diverse range of students in Australian schools. Further to this, documents were drafted specifically targeting the needs of students with disability such as the *Students with disability* paper which was open for public consultation in 2012 and *Student diversity and the Australian Curriculum, advice for principals, schools and teachers*, which was released in January 2013 (ACARA, 2013).

Central to these initiatives, ACARA committed to 'meet the needs of all students, regardless of their circumstances, progress in learning or the type or location of school they attended, putting in place measures to reinforce every student's entitlement to rigorous, relevant and engaging learning experiences' (ACARA, 2013, p. 6). ACARA acknowledged that adjustments to curriculum, instruction and environment were central in meeting the needs of students with disability and ensuring equity of access to the Australian Curriculum. A flowchart was published to describe programming learning area content according to chronological age (for dignified and rigorous teaching and learning) and then the need to personalise learning and assessment according to individual needs, aligned to achievement standards (ACARA, 2012a). These accommodations were commendable; however, they raised the recurring issue that they focused on fitting students with disability into mainstream learning area content and general capabilities, rather than having a curriculum that was inclusive of their specific needs. Herein lie tensions with the spirit if not the letter of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Commonwealth), the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Department of Education and Training, 2005), Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006, and the *UNCRPD Committee General Comment 4 on Article 24*, (UNCRPD, 2016).

The 2014 review of the Australian Curriculum addressed the controversy about what it is that young people should be able to know, understand and do through education. The review signalled that the Australian Curriculum was 'manifestly deficit in its inclusiveness and accommodation of the learning needs of students with disability' (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p. 5). Such limitations reflected earlier criticisms regarding the development process and the retro-fit approach of making an effort to include students with disability after the initial curriculum development (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014). The Australian government's initial response to the review supported recommendations to further develop inclusive learning and assessment materials to better support all students with disability and identified the need for an explicit curriculum for students who are yet to achieve Foundation level (Department of Education, 2014). Such a response indicates that Australian education systems face similar challenges to many other countries in enacting inclusive education successfully, despite adopting inclusive policies (Allan, 2011; Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). The Australian government recommendations also signal that the inclusive education discourse in Australia has shifted from focusing exclusively on students with a disability to 'encompassing the delivery of a high-quality education to all students' (Anderson & Boyle, 2015, p. 4). Considering these responses, we argue that if students with disability are to be treated equitably (that is if the Australian Curriculum is to be a curriculum *for all*), then students with disability need to be considered within all aspects of the curriculum (Evans, 2015).

The silence of the voices of disabled people and all educators and providers for students with disability in the initial curriculum architecture emerged as a key part of debates about knowledge production. That is, who was involved in writing the shaping papers and deciding on the knowledge that was valued in the initial curriculum? Why was there a lack of initial consultation with disability advocates, educators and students, and why was a consultative group formed only after the event? As Kirk and Macdonald (2001) identify, teacher voice is important in understanding how curriculum design accommodates and supports

students with disability to meet their aspirations of equity, access and capability. Valuing teacher experience and existing curriculum design across jurisdictions and analysing the strengths and challenges of meeting the needs of learners would seem natural and necessary contributions to inform and set directions for curriculum design.

Even more concerning was the silence of the voice of individuals with disability and their families/carers. Disability activists in education have long affirmed: 'Nothing about us without us' (Goodley, 2016, p.1). As Boxall and Ralph (2009) suggest, knowledge about disability comes primarily from people without disability. Further to this, we support Nussbaum's notion that education plays a critical role in placing students with disability in a position of capability to function (Nussbaum, 2003; Price, 2015) and the richness of diversities of learners, their families and communities as assets for learning and teaching (Price & Green, 2019; Price et al., 2020).

We therefore question: at what point will inclusive education come to fruition consistently across Australian education to embrace the learning and wellbeing of all young people? The initial Australian Curriculum fell short in delivering optimal educational experiences and outcomes for a significant percentage of our student population (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017; Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2012). For example, over one-fifth of the students in mainstream education in Australia identify as a student with a disability (Department of Education and Training, 2012) and are challenged by idealisations of what students *should be* (Price, 2015). 'Students with disabilities are continually required to fit into mainstream learning and if it is deemed too difficult, they can be segregated or excluded from participation' (Price, 2015, p. 19). As reported by a recent inquiry into Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian government schools, increasing disproportionality of students with disabilities in mainstream settings is receiving take homes, suspensions and exclusions and this is not attributed to population growth (Graham et al., 2020). Arguably, efforts to apply inclusive education have contributed to the persistence and widening of educational inequality rather than equalising educational outcomes (Slee, 2010). This has been an enduring issue, as identified in a series of reports from reviews in the Australian Capital Territory, Victorian and Queensland education jurisdictions (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017; Innes, 2016; Shaddock et al., 2015), and as such, demands immediate attention. To this end, the report from the *Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability* which is due to be tabled in Parliament on April 29, 2022 will be of interest. Reports of public hearings on education have identified access to the curriculum as a major issue for many students with disabilities (Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability: Interim Report, Education, and Learning, 2020).

ACARA has increasingly responded to the growing advocacy for the inclusion of diverse learners within education and particularly the curriculum, so we turn to examine the more recent provision for students with disability in the Australian Curriculum versions 8.3 to 8.5.

Students with disability in the current Australian Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum's original three-dimensional architecture addressing learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities informed aspirations to meet the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, in meeting 21st century skill development (MCEETYA, 2008), however, little has changed in this Australian Curriculum architecture to accommodate students with disability and the current Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019) 'confirms the need for the Australian Curriculum to encompass all three dimensions' as outlined in *The shape of the Australian Curriculum version 5.0* (ACARA, 2020 p. 13).

In recent years, the F–10 yearly progression including the addition of senior secondary learning areas of English, Mathematics, Science and HaSS continue to promote a normative, developmental expectation of content descriptors and achievement standards. As Forbes (2007) argues, 'Designated curriculum authorities must move from writing curricula and syllabus materials that appear to target the "typical" or average learner to those which include *all* students at all phases of schooling' (p. 69, original emphasis). *The shape of the Australian Curriculum version 4.0* (ACARA, 2012a) described 'a continuum of learning that makes clear to teachers what is to be taught across the years of schooling. It makes clear what students should learn and the quality of learning expected of them as they progress through school' (p. 10), replicated within the shaping paper Version 5.0 (ACARA, 2020). This learning continuum has encouraged more flexibility in supporting student diversity, for example, students identified with disability and/or gifted and talented can access content according to their developmental needs. However, the identification of what *should* be learnt and what is *expected* has been challenged in debates concerning what knowledge is represented and valued, developmental versus age-appropriate curriculum, and the valuing of students' life-worlds, strengths, interests and abilities. Within the disability field, some educators are seeking finer detail, including splinter skills, arguing that year-level progressions do not provide the opportunity for some students to achieve and progress. A common teacher response includes, 'Educators sometimes find creating access to grade-level academic content to be confusing or even incomprehensible' (Browder et al., 2007,

p. 3). Teachers go on to describe how the year-level progressions can be irrelevant for some students, for example those with intellectual disability, where a focus on the student's abilities and individual learning needs is essential. Within increasing prioritisation on personalised learning and adjustments, learning progressions are being highlighted as in current revisions of the curriculum. However, in aiming to promote educational progression, for some students, showing progression along the learning continuum is a challenge as the shifts are too large for them to achieve and the progressions may not be aligned to their strengths, interest or developmental needs. Further to this, who do these learning progressions benefit? Who do they exclude from furthering learning?

Currently the Australian Curriculum continues similar discourse:

> Students with disability represent a significant number of students accessing the Australian Curriculum. Students' individual strengths and abilities should be central to the teaching and learning planning process. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 outline the requirements for education providers to ensure that all students with disability can access education 'on the same basis' as their peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. (ACARA, 2021)

The shift has been in relation to adjustments being aligned to the introduction of national data sets for students with disability and the broad categories of disability.

> The Australian Curriculum provides the flexibility for teachers to take into account the different rates at which children learn. Information about the levels of adjustments can be found in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data for Students with Disability (NCCD) Guidelines which are reviewed annually. (ACARA, 2021)

A noteworthy addition to the current Australian Curriculum architecture was within the languages learning area, whereby students can learn Auslan as a language within the curriculum. This offered increased access to and participation in the curriculum for all students, with the potential to facilitate enhanced peer networking, socialising, communication, wellbeing, identity, cognition and subsequent learning outcomes. Such an inclusion in the Australian Curriculum signalled a shift towards more inclusive curriculum design that respects identity.

The Australian Curriculum version 8.3 also evidenced the emergence of a stronger student diversity lens across the learning areas. This included language addressing 'student needs', 'needs of students' and 'needs of diverse learners', with explicit definitions and resources specifically addressing students with disability, gifted and talented students, and those with English as another language or dialect (EAL/D). In reference to students with disability, ACARA provides the following overview:

It is important to consider that:

- many students with disability are able to achieve educational standards commensurate with their peers
- not all students with a disability will require adjustments to the curriculum, instruction or environment
- not all students requiring adjustments to the curriculum, instruction or environment will have a disability
- students with disability requiring adjustments to one aspect of their learning may not require the same adjustment, if any, to another
- to comply with the Standards, consultation includes the student and parent as part of the process to personalise learning
- students with the same disability may not require equivalent adjustments
- not every student with a disability will require ongoing adjustments
- students with disability may also be gifted and talented and/or have English as an additional language or dialect
- to comply with the Standards, adjustment reviews occur regularly, and are changed or withdrawn where necessary. (ACARA, 2017b)

In efforts to implement the initial Australian Curriculum, teachers of students with disability have often moved to applying the general capabilities to support access to the curriculum and more personalised learning. As such, ACARA has responded by raising the prominence of both the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities in supporting access and participation across the diversity of learners. For example, in reference to accommodating gifted and talented students, *The shape of the Australian Curriculum version 4.0* states:

> Teachers can use the Australian Curriculum flexibly to meet the individual learning needs of gifted and talented students. Teachers can enrich student learning by providing students with opportunities to work with learning area content in more depth or breadth; emphasising specific aspects of the general capabilities learning continua (for example, the higher order cognitive skills of the Critical and creative thinking capability); and/or focusing on cross-curriculum priorities. Teachers can also accelerate student learning by drawing on content from later levels in the Australian Curriculum and/or from local state and territory teaching and learning materials. (ACARA, 2012a, p. 20)

A significant progression within the Australian Curriculum has been the provision of specific illustrations of access and participation for students with disability. This includes elaborations, work samples, and examples of personalised learning and making reasonable adjustments across the learning areas. Significantly, the Australian Curriculum documentation places responsibility for adapting curriculum and making reasonable adjustments on schools and particularly teachers of students with disability. ACARA's growing resources reflect innovative curriculum design including work samples and illustrations of personalised planning with elements of differentiation and universal design, with applications across a diversity of learners. Whilst it could be argued that these should have been embedded from the outset of curriculum design, models of inclusive curriculum are integral in progressing further Australian Curriculum iterations. The emerging language emphasises individualised and contextual learning through illustrations of personalised learning which 'build on students' interests, strengths, goals and learning needs, and address the cognitive, affective, physical, social and aesthetic needs of all students' (ACARA, 2017a). We suggest that such an approach is foundational in advancing inclusive education for all learners, and equips the nation with quality examples. As previously mentioned, a flowchart representing programming of learning content and personalised learning was added to support teachers in programming for students with disability (see Fig. 1). However, we reaffirm the importance of prioritising an inclusive conceptual foundation from the outset of national curriculum design, especially given the current challenge in locating this flowchart when navigating the online platform. It should be at the forefront of a quality equitable curriculum.
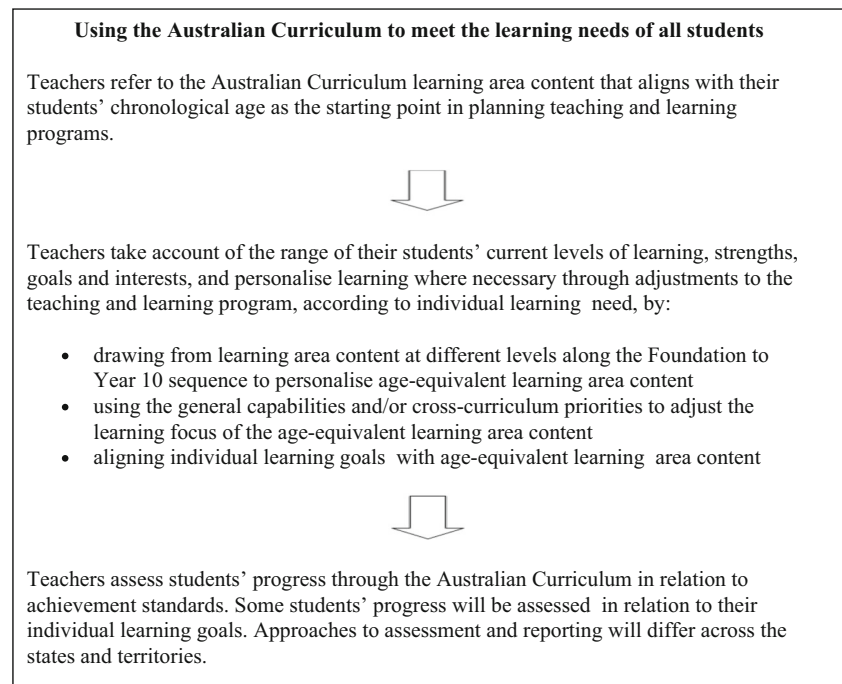
This approach reinforces the importance of the teachers' role whereby they need to:

- plan dignified teaching and learning programs that are respectful of their students' age …
- use their knowledge of students' individual needs, strengths and interests to ensure access to the teaching and learning program …
- [provide] personalised learning … in relation to curriculum, instruction and the environment. (ACARA, 2017a)

ACARA suggests that the online format of the curriculum provides flexibility to cater for student diversity through personalised learning. For quality experienced teachers, such practice underpins their everyday teaching. They value what students with disability identify as important to them and build on their capabilities (Price, 2016). What teachers want from the national curriculum is more inclusive content and achievement standards that reduce the sole responsibility of teachers to make the adjustments through their teaching. The curriculum needs to be responsive and fluid in supporting all students to achieve and progress. The *Report of the Select Committee on Access to the South Australian Education System for Students with a Disability* (Parliament of South Australia, 2017) described a submission by the South Australian Special Education Principals' and Leaders' Association as follows:

The SA Special Education Principals and Leaders Association also informed the Committee that the curriculum is not tailored to, or flexible enough

Fig. 1 Meeting diverse learning needs. Source: ACARA (2017a)

Using the Australian Curriculum to meet the learning needs of all students

Teachers refer to the Australian Curriculum learning area content that aligns with their students' chronological age as the starting point in planning teaching and learning programs.

Teachers take account of the range of their students' current levels of learning, strengths, goals and interests, and personalise learning where necessary through adjustments to the teaching and learning program, according to individual learning need, by:

- drawing from learning area content at different levels along the Foundation to Year 10 sequence to personalise age-equivalent learning area content
- using the general capabilities and/or cross-curriculum priorities to adjust the learning focus of the age-equivalent learning area content
- aligning individual learning goals with age-equivalent learning area content

Teachers assess students' progress through the Australian Curriculum in relation to achievement standards. Some students' progress will be assessed in relation to their individual learning goals. Approaches to assessment and reporting will differ across the states and territories.

for students with disability, and that this causes issues for mainstream teachers:

> The education of all students in SA is based on the Australian Curriculum. When the Australian Curriculum was developed it contained little or no reference to learners whose skills, knowledge and understandings were not yet at those described for learners at foundation level. It requires an in-depth knowledge of the curriculum, aspects of child development and the learning styles of individuals with a range of disabilities to create meaningful teaching and learning programs that incorporate the demands of the Australian Curriculum whilst meeting the needs of students with disability. Some teachers in mainstream schools are not confident with this process and this can result in students with disability being assigned tasks that do not necessarily meet their needs or offer them opportunities for intellectual stretch. (p. 83)

ACARA continues to face challenges as it attempts to provide further content inclusive of all learners beyond work samples and illustrations. However, an underlying responsibility remains with teachers and sites as evidenced in *The shape of the Australian Curriculum* version 1 (ACARA, 2009):

> Some of the variation among students in their level of development and progress can become the basis for inequities in their educational experiences. The Board will not accommodate these disparities by setting different expectations for different groups, since that reinforces differences and creates inequitable outcomes. The primary role in dealing with these differences lies with school systems, schools and teachers. (p. 10)

Whilst we applaud increased examples of adjustments and differentiation, the current curriculum continues to affirm that:

> in Australia, the onus is principally on the teacher to make 'appropriate curriculum adjustments' to cater for the needs of all students including those with SEN and Disability regardless of appropriate training or expertise. Differentiation of the curriculum is promoted at the level of policy in all states and territories but policy is silent on methods of differentiation. (Garner et al., 2012, p. 6)

Finally, the current Australian Curriculum design falls short for students with disability through the normative, *expected* achievement standards and reporting mechanisms. For example, the language used presents potentially polarising notions as reflected in the following: 'The achievement standards describe what students are typically able to understand and able to do. They describe expected achievement. Across F–10 the set of achievement standards describe a broad sequence of expected learning' (ACARA, 2012a, p. 22). Terms such as 'typical' can potentially relegate some students to an *atypical* category, those who do not achieve the typical level of understanding or expected learning standards. Further to this, the debates surrounding the current Australian Curriculum A–E grade reporting of achievement standards to parents/carers/students, which is not inclusive of students with disability, has been deflected back to local jurisdictions rather than being embedded in inclusive curriculum design.

> Education authorities and individual schools are able to determine, in consultation with parents and communities, the style and format of reporting that best meets local needs and circumstances, including provision of any additional elements of student reports. This might include written comments about the quality of learning demonstrated by the student; indicators of student effort, engagement, behaviour and improvement; student self-assessment; and future learning goals. (ACARA, 2012a, p. 27)

Some students are continually 'working towards' the prescribed A–E grades, with significant implications for their self-concept. Whilst we encourage variations to reporting, we argue that the national curriculum still advocates a 'typical', 'normative' achievement level. We argue that *all* students need to be included respectfully in demonstrating progress and achievement. Therefore, we pose the following: Where to from here in progressing an inclusive, equitable and high-quality curriculum for all?

Curriculum writ large, curriculum aimed low?

If we were to consider curriculum in its broadest sense, we would consider the combined impact of the syllabi, pedagogy, assessment and the organisation of schools including the built environment, the organisation of classrooms, protocols and rituals. Reformulations of syllabi as a curriculum package by education jurisdictions, or for that matter, discussions of curriculum, too often take a narrow view that focuses upon the knowledge content and the materials created to communicate that knowledge. We argue that any discussion of curriculum reform, in this context, the Australian Curriculum, must acknowledge the context within which schools are situated if they are to initiate the cultural change required to ensure an inclusive education for students with disability. In this respect, one of the first observations may be that the Australian Curriculum materials reflect an ablest world. Australia had an opportunity to draw on the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, the Disability Standards for Education 2005 and the

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 to establish its foundations to ensure that students with disability were able to access the curriculum, participate in classroom teaching and learning, achieve optimal results, and find themselves and their world represented in the curriculum materials. These were the important lessons we drew from questions of race, culture and gender in the curriculum. Whilst advocating a curriculum for all, the Australian Curriculum fell short because it was an incremental rather than authentic reform initiative, particularly for students with disability.

An assessment of the impact of the Australian Curriculum on students with disability can commence through reference to a series of reports and inquiries across the state and territory jurisdictions. These reports cumulatively build a picture of the experiences of many children with disability in Australian schools. The reports speak to the broader context of Australian education as well as to the minutiae of activity within classrooms. Our contention is that it is important to consider curriculum reform for students with disability with specific reference to this data.

Three reports were published in Australia in 2012, each pointing to problems in the experiences and outcomes of students with disability in schooling. In June 2012, the federal Department of Education and Training published the findings of the *Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005*. The Disability Standards for Education are a requirement of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. It took thirteen years of discussion and debate for the Australian education jurisdictions to reach agreement on these standards. This is indicative of resistance to change on matters of the education of students with disability and here it can be said Australia is not dissimilar to other jurisdictions (Norwich, 2007; Tomlinson, 2017). Seven years later the report of the review highlighted seven thematic areas that reflect fundamental problems for the implementation of the standards despite the legal requirement:

- Awareness: Teachers and school communities were largely unaware of the standards and what they meant for the education of students with disability in their schools.
- Clarity and definitions: There exists confusion about the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, its detail and the meaning of the legislation for schools with respect to key definitions and their application in school practice.
- Access and participation: The right to access and participation is not well understood, especially accessing and participating in the curriculum (the learning activities of the classroom).
- Discrimination: Discrimination is widespread and understandings of disability are not well-developed.
- Complaints, accountability and compliance: Complaints are numerous and growing across jurisdictions. Proper accountability mechanisms are underdeveloped.

- Contemporary education context: There is a great deal that is done in the name of improving performance through competition that directly compromises the education of students with disability.
- Resources: Questions of resources – human and material – are endemic; moreover, resources have not been sufficiently allocated to ensure familiarity with the Act and the standards.
    (Department of Education and Training, 2012)

This report was followed by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO, 2012) report on *Programmes for students with special learning needs*, which was presented to the Victorian Parliament on 29 August 2012. The report was critical of the Victorian Department for Education and Early Childhood Development, stating that:

Since 2006, DEECD [Department of Education and Early Childhood Development] has distributed more than $2.6 billion to schools through the PSD [Programmes for Students with Disabilities]. However, DEECD does not have the information it needs to determine whether PSD funding is being used efficiently and effectively. Concerns raised about this by VAGO in 2007 still have not been adequately addressed and instead of having five years of high-quality data about the program, the department still knows very little about its impact on the educational outcomes of supported students. (VAGO, 2012, p. viii)

This issue was revisited four years later in a Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities (Department of Education and Training, 2016) in Victorian state schools chaired by the former Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Graeme Innes.

Later in the same year, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2012) published *Held back*, which reports on the experiences of students with disability in Victorian schools. Data was collected from 1827 educators, students with disability and their parents. The report provides an account of the experiences of students with disability that are less than inclusive; significant discrimination, bullying and underachievement are instanced in the report. The authors of the report remind us that access to and success in education for Victorian students with disability may be something of a lottery, which raises questions regarding the relevance and accessibility of the Australian Curriculum for students with disability. They also point to data demonstrating the lower completion rates for students with disability and the higher levels of poverty amongst Australians with disability.

Given the inextricable link between curriculum and pedagogy, national reports in the media (Macdonald, 2015) that a student with a disability had been secluded in a purpose-built

cage of 2 metres by 2 metres costing $5195.00 to build that abutted a primary school classroom in the nation's capital, Canberra, resulted in the commissioning of a major inquiry (Shaddock et al., 2015). Not only did the inquiry shed light on non-inclusive practices in that jurisdiction, but a parent in Queensland spoke out about her child with a disability being isolated for extended periods in a room that was locked from the outside. This was not the only such instance. A review of education for students with disability in state schools was established by the Queensland Minister for Education, the Hon Kate Jones (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). Seclusion rooms with external locks across the state were immediately decommissioned by the Deputy Director-General responsible for schools. The Queensland review echoed earlier findings by reporting that:

- Parents are often told to take their children with disability to other schools by principals, school psychologists and school administrative staff.
- Many children are moved from school to school until they experience a satisfactory education.
- Many parents opt for special education because their child feels safe and supported.
- There is a lack of the professional knowledge required to build inclusive practices and cultures.
- Teachers reported a lack of professional training to be able to adapt their practices for a diverse range of students.
- Specific support for schools was limited and specialist services such as Braille had been in decline over the years.
- The culture of separate special education is pervasive.
- Suspensions, absences and exclusions are disproportionately high for the cohort of students with disability.
- There are problems of access, both to school facilities and to learning.
- Schools give confused and contradictory messages about inclusive education.
- Teachers have limited knowledge about adapting pedagogy and assessment for students with disability.
- School staff have limited knowledge of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 and their implications for schools.
- Levels of home schooling and distance education for students with disability are disproportionate.
    (Department of Education and Training, 2012).

Such findings have direct and indirect implications for the curriculum that is provided for students with disability, which the Australian Curriculum needs to address to ensure all students are purposefully engaged in relevant learning which can provide opportunities for achievement and development.

Reports from the Legislative Council of New South Wales (2017), the Parliament of South Australia (the Vincent Report) (2017) and the Victorian Department of Education (DET, 2016) replicate and augment these findings. Following this, the Northern Territory Department of Education commissioned its own investigation into the education of students with disability. It is difficult to deny that, like education jurisdictions elsewhere, Australia is not achieving the performance it expects in education generally when it comes to students with disability.

We contend that reforming the curriculum for students with disability is a much larger project than rewriting or adapting syllabi and tests. It requires a much more expansive view of curriculum, a view that recognises that the challenge is not just making additional curriculum for different cohorts. It is also a question of recognising the ways in which curriculum practices systematically exclude students with disability. In high audit cultures (Ball, 2013) where countries compete with each other, jurisdictions compete with each other, school districts compete with each other, and schools compete with their neighbours, students become the 'bearers of results' (Slee, 2011, 2019). There is collateral damage (Bauman, 2004) as the Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DET, 2012) identified when referring to the impact of the education context. We would go further to suggest that Australia exhibits in its curriculum an unfortunate bifurcation between diverse learners including students with disability and regular students and thereby lowers the curriculum expectations. This lowering of expectations and thereby achievement is a theme throughout the reports we cite.

Conclusion

The Melbourne Declaration was bold in its vision for a democratic education and education for democracy for young Australians, thereby still a goal needing to be achieved as emphasised in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019). As Pearl and Knight (1999) counsel, the curriculum, writ large, provides an opportunity for an apprenticeship in democracy. No such apprenticeship may be pursued if groups of students are systematically excluded. This paper is a reminder of that vision and a metaphorical visit to the optometrist to check the vision of the drafters of the curriculum and of educators in general. Perhaps we cannot 'keep the frames and change the lenses' to improve our reception of the vision. 'As educators, it is important to challenge normative perceptions and resist seeing diversity or by extension, the diversities of learners in deficit, instead recognising diversity as a strength in light of the richness it adds' (Price et al., 2020, p. 44).

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