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## Where does it say I have to do that? How can secondary schools enact assessment policy for students with disabilities?

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## Academic Leadership Journal

The existence of a policy does not necessarily mean that a school will ‘enact’ it (Fulcher, 1997). Queensland Government’s current *P-12 Curriculum Framework* provides schools with a direction to achieve “a curriculum for all”. However, experience with working with secondary school staff is that they are commonly unaware of the implications of this policy to their everyday work. In fact, they usually respond to any references by the writer to a “curriculum for all” (meaning providing a curriculum for all students in their class, including those with disabilities) with “Where does it say I have to do that?” Meaning, “...where is that in writing?”

Some Australian schools are finding it difficult to engage in the standards-based education reform with an increasingly diverse range of learners in classrooms. Inclusive education in itself is “arguably the biggest challenge facing school systems” (Ainscow, 2005, p. 182). The challenges of inclusive and standards-based reforms are even more challenging in the secondary school context where reform has been historically slower (Fullan, 2000). It is acknowledged that curriculum adjustments, including to assessment, for students with disabilities (SWD) is more difficult in secondary schools because of the tensions of curriculum, highly structured timetabling, limited teaching time, lack of parental involvement and inflexible teaching approaches (Pearce & Forlin, 2005). The structures and demands of secondary schools may even complicate and compromise inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2005; Pearce & Forlin, 2005). In Australia, academic commentary has called for an “urgent need” for further research and policy development in relation to the way secondary schools successfully include students with disabilities (Shaddock, Giorcelli, Smyth-Lyon, 2007, p. 11). Black and William (2001, p. 10) when outlining steps for implementing assessment for learning note that teachers need -

...a variety of living examples of implementation, by teachers with whom they can identify and from whom they can derive both convictions and confidence that they can do better, and see concrete examples of what doing better means in practice.

This article describes the ways a secondary school ‘enacts’ the principles of ‘assessment for learning’ (AfL) for students with disabilities as described in the Queensland Government’s *P-12 Curriculum Framework* policy (<http://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/framework/p-12/index.html>). Many schools enacting policy and legislation related to students with disabilities are confused about why this is needed and how it can be accomplished effectively (King-Sears, 2008). Much research has been done about inclusive education and the issues surrounding it. Arguments within the debate include anxiety because teachers have not been trained or prepared to work with students with disabilities, lack of staff development in learning and teaching, frustration with school and departmental processes, such as increased paperwork, lack of funding, human and material resources, lack of time for planning and meetings, difficulties maintaining discipline and challenging all students (Horne & Timmons, 2007; Lindsay, 2004; Shaddock et al., 2007). Teachers at all stages of education “struggle with their efforts to assign fair, accurate, and meaningful grades to students with disabilities, especially those placed in general education classrooms” (Guskey & Jung, 2009, p. 53). In contrast, there is also much advice available to schools through the commentary research of academics to support schools. There are also

settings where enacting curriculum and assessment policy for SWD are reported to be successful.

This discussion will provide secondary school leadership teams with suggestions that can direct educational practices to encourage equitable, formative assessment practices for students with disabilities (SWD) thus providing examples of implementation.

## **Policy Context – Queensland**

The Queensland Government's *P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy* and its guidelines for assessing student achievement and moderating teacher judgments and guidelines for students with disabilities, were released in November 2008. The *P-12 Curriculum Framework* contains four policy statements that are "mandated for state primary, secondary and special schools" (Queensland Government, 2008, p. 3). The mandated actions for schools relating to assessment is Policy Statement 2 -

Monitor and assess individual student achievement and evaluate it

against state-wide and national standards, regularly using collaborative

processes to support teachers in making consistent judgments.

(Queensland Government, 2008, p. 5).

This paper argues that the *P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy* and its guidelines present to schools with clear definitions of assessment its purposes and requirements of how it is to be used in Queensland schools. The accompanying guidelines for students with disabilities provides schools with even more clarity as it "help(s) teachers and school administrators translate the *P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy* statements into practice for students with disabilities" (p. 1). Thomas and Loxley (1997) warn that policy implementation that anyone ".....could not fail to be impressed by the difficulties in implementing progressive policies – that is, ones that promote inclusive education" (p. 273).

The *P-12 Curriculum Framework Guidelines for SWD* (Queensland Government, 2008) and other state and national policy directing schools, provides an overview of the messages of inclusive education as it relates to curriculum, assessment and reporting. For example,

Embedded within the principles of an inclusive approach and articulated through the policy statements in the *P-12 Curriculum Framework*, are the expectations that schools and teachers enable all students, including students with disabilities, to access and achieve the learning described in the mandated curriculum documents.

(Queensland Government, 2008, p. 1)

Relating to assessment, the *P-12 Curriculum Guidelines for SWD* (Queensland Government, 2008) recommends teachers plan all teaching and assessment with required adjustments for all students so they have access to and achieve the curriculum. This requires the "curriculum to be inherently designed for flexibility and able to support teachers to be responsive to students' educational needs in a proactive way" (p. 1). Students are placed at the centre of the process and teachers are required to align the needs of students to the other components of curriculum enacting a curriculum for all. References to a curriculum for all are now apparent in state and national policy directing curriculum in

Queensland schools (Appendix A). These policies are not in competition with each other and combine to clarify further message to schools make evidence based decisions for teaching and assessment based upon the learner.

Teachers are required to make evidence based decisions about the needs of learners and apply a variety of assessment processes and tools to monitor individual progress and achievement and “respond with targeted teaching” (p. 6). The guidelines provide further advice for teachers in the middle phase of learning about how this can be achieved. The guidelines recommend the processes of collaborative teacher planning and co-teaching to design and provide “multiple opportunities” (p. 13) for all students to learn and demonstrate their learning and provide questions to prompt decisions about assessment for all learners -

How will they show what they know?

How will we find out if they've learned what we wanted them to?

How will we use what we have found out to inform or teaching?

Have I ensured that the adjustments used for assessment have been included in my teaching?

Do the assessment opportunities link to the student's intended curriculum?

(Queensland Government, 2008, p. 16)

The question “How will we use what we have found out to inform our teaching” (Queensland Government, 2008, p. 16) is a reference to AfL. The policy and its guidelines define the two major types of assessment, formative ‘assessment for learning’ and summative, ‘assessment of learning’. (2008). The guidelines define ‘assessment for learning’ as

....the frequent, interactive assessments of student progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately. It is used continually to inform teaching and learning.

(Queensland Government, 2008, p. 2)

The policy requirement to place a diverse range of students at the centre of the teaching, learning and assessment process and to use assessment for learning to inform teaching and learning. This requires in itself a targeted response by school leaders. To enact these policy requirements “.....learning for the enactors is essential” (Cohen- Barnes, 1993, p.208). The ‘enactors’ need to have an understanding of AfL and how it relates to their daily practice.

## **Assessment for learning**

The potential for assessment to improve student learning is well documented (Black & William, 2001) and sometimes overlooked in secondary schools. In secondary schools, there may be an emphasis on summative scores of achievement resulting from the influence of high-stakes testing. Another factor is that some secondary teachers are less comfortable with “open-ended, student centered” assessment (Marsh, 2007, p. 27). Implementation of AfL requires “personal change” for teachers (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William, 2003, p. 80). For some teachers a personal change may include learning how

to provide multiple opportunities and ways for students to demonstrate their learning. This requirement, to provide multiple opportunities and ways for students is a key message of the *P-12 Curriculum Framework* and aspect of AfL.

In summary, academic literature asserts that AfL improves student learning by;

- aligning curriculum and assessment,
- focusing teaching and learning,
- building shared understanding and language,
- improving student motivation to demonstrate learning,
- increasing consistency of teacher judgment.

### *Aligning of curriculum and assessment*

Alignment of curriculum to assessment is a common theme in literature about AfL and in recent years has challenged the view of assessment being separate from learning (Gardner, Harlen, Hayward & Stobart, 2008). Numerous studies that reveal that the closer the alignment of teaching and assessment the “better students achieve” (Zepke, Leach, Brandon, Chapman, Neitze, Rawlins & Scott , 2005, p. 25). Alignment of teaching and assessment processes is implicit in AfL as its purpose is to provide information to students and teachers to improve learning and direct future teaching (Black, 1996; Black et al., 2003; Black & William, 2001 and Marsh, 2007). The *P-12 Curriculum Framework* (Queensland Government, 2008) is very clear that teachers need to align all the curriculum components to each other and to the needs of students.

### *Focusing teaching and learning*

If one purpose of AfL is to align teaching, learning and assessment, it could be assumed that teachers using AfL will provide more focused teaching and learning opportunities for students since they are clear about their need. For assessment to function formatively, the results have to be used to adjust teaching and learning, thus focusing on the needs of the learners Black & William (2001). Teachers who use AfL thought of teaching “in terms of facilitating students’ learning” (Black et al., 2007, p. 91). The teachers saw the purpose of their teaching was to focus on how to help students learn. If the students did not learn, “then they had to rethink the lesson and try another way” (p. 91). The *P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy* (Queensland Government, 2008) recognizes this need by recommending teachers “provide focused and explicit teaching and monitor results in response to particular needs...” (p. 5).

### *Building shared understanding and language*

Gardner et al. (2008) have determined that the “major first step in establishing a common language to use in the context of assessment by teachers is the identification if principles widely held” (p. 16). Without this step discussion about assessment practices may “dissolve into a melee of jargon” (p. 15) used to describe different types of assessment its uses and perceptions about its quality. Discussions about assessment should be based upon what teachers believe is important about assessment. They

contend that principles such as “assessment of any kind should ultimately improve learning” (p.16) and this needs to be established by staff to build shared understanding and language. Once these shared understanding and beliefs are established, the *P-12 Curriculum Framework* (Queensland Government, 2008) could provide a basis for discussion and a point of direction for school practice.

### *Improving student motivation to demonstrate learning*

A major concept related to AfL is that assessment is not merely “done to students”, rather than “done for students to guide and enhance their learning” (Marsh, 2007, p. 26). Students are provided with frequent and useful feedback about their progress through the AfL process. They are given credit for what learning they demonstrate “when not bounded by the constraints of comparators that reflect other children, not the curriculum” (Cumming, 2009, p. 10). Students are given opportunity to respond to feedback through the AfL process by reflecting on their work and making improvements. This as a benefit for students as it allows students to be involved in the process through feedback and empowers them to realize their own learning needs and to have control of their learning, thus ensuring motivation and raising achievement (Marsh, 2007).

### *Increasing consistency of teacher judgement*

The role of teacher judgment through moderation about the quality of student achievement of content standards is important within the AfL process (Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2008). Moderation provides the context for teachers to share interpretations of assessment tasks and the requisite standards and to develop a common language for describing and assessing students’ work (Klenowski, 2009).

Wyatt Smith & Klenowski (2008) warn that their observations in middle years of schooling demonstrate that this process will not necessarily occur “in the absence of policy direction” (p. 10). The *P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy Statement 2* (Queensland Government’s, 2008, p. 3) provides this direction as it requires all state schools to -

Monitor and assess individual student achievement and evaluate it against statewide and national standards, regularly using collaborative processes to support teachers in making consistent judgments.

### **Suggestions for success**

The review of literature relating to successful policy implementation in schools and the use of AfL uncovered a number of themes. These themes are used in this discussion as suggestions for success for the implementation of policy related to SWD and AfL in secondary schools. These suggestions are;

- leaders need to “makes sense” of policy for teachers,
- the teaching team develops common and shared beliefs and actions,
- relevant professional learning opportunities are provided,
- collaborative curriculum planning and delivery is arranged.

These themes are also apparent in the *P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy* (Queensland Government,

2008) and can be used to direct schools to achieve greater outcomes for all their students through implementation of AfL. An example of how this is achieved in a secondary school complements this discussion.

Carmel is the Head of Special Education Services (HOSSES) at a large special education program (SEP) in a secondary school. The special education program supports students with disabilities and their mainstream teachers through collaborative planning, co-teaching and specialist advice. Carmel has a district reputation of 'enacting' the policy statements for the *P-12 Curriculum Framework* in an efficient and effective manner for SWD in her school. In this section, her experiences are presented as they relate to the suggestions for success derived from the literature for assessment for learning for SWD in secondary schools. Carmel participated in a lengthy conversation about her experiences implementation of the *P-12 Curriculum Framework* and its guidelines with the writer. The content of the conversation reflected the above themes for success.

### *Leaders "make sense" of policy for teachers*

Academic commentary about assessment, secondary schools and students with disability, does not centre on the inappropriateness of the policies that direct schools. It describes the barriers to why these policies are not enacted. For example, a barrier can be the attitude of some teachers. Teaching is not just a technical process and that teaching involves political, moral and technical dimensions (Fulcher, 1989, p. 8). In fact, moral and political dimensions precede a teacher's decision about how or what to teach. Fulcher reminds us that

Teachers, like everyone else, are equally members of an unequal society and may contribute to, or undermine, this inequality.

(Fulcher, 1989, p. 259)

When a school leader "makes sense" (Fullan, 2000) of policy for teachers. They can persuade and influence staff to "undermine...inequality" (Fulcher, 1989, p.259). School leaders play a "pivotal role in supporting inclusive practice" (Shaddock et al., 2007, pg. 10). Successful teachers also demonstrated awareness of relevant legislation and policy and the implications on their daily work (Shaddock et al , 2007) This awareness is a result of the provision of learning opportunities by leaders to uncover the relevance of policy and make sense of it for teachers. Closely aligned to "making sense" of policy is the provision of opportunity for teachers to develop common and shared beliefs and actions through professional learning.

Carmel, the HOSSES in a large secondary school, assessed the knowledge of the P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy by her SEP team as very high and rated it higher than the rest of the school staff. When asked what contributed to this higher understanding by SEP staff she said "me". When Carmel had first arrived at the school, she "wasn't happy with the outcomes of a number of kids who were underperforming". She had already started changing the curriculum when the Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework (QCAR) was released as a draft document. After investigating this document, she realized that "finally there was going to be a framework around including all kids" and this "motivated me".

As a result of her understanding of the draft policy, Carmel was able to make sense of the policy for the

special education program staff. She “pitched it” to staff by encouraging them to be “ready” for any change either *P-12 Curriculum Framework* and/or the upcoming Australian curriculum. She had already done a lot of work changing the “mindset” of staff about curriculum from one centered in subject content to a student centered approach.

### *The teaching team has common and shared beliefs and actions*

In the context of assessment of SWD in the middle years of learning, there are a number of areas that require common and shared beliefs and actions. First, general and special education staff need to break down the division between the two educational fields and develop a common language based upon the curriculum and the needs of students (Defur, 2005; Lynch & Adams, 2008). Second, teachers need to establish common and shared beliefs and actions about AfL (Gardner et al., 2008). This article suggests that this can be a result of professional conversations during relevant learning opportunities provided by school leaders (Fullan, 2000; Senge, 2001).

Carmel provided many opportunities for staff to discuss values and beliefs about students, teaching and curriculum. The SEP and general education staff developed common and shared beliefs and actions relating to student learning, curriculum, assessment and reporting, demonstrated by completion and delivery of curriculum which meets the needs of all learners. Carmel used professional dialogues to assist staff understand why all children should have the opportunity to learn the curriculum rather than preparing them for the “inevitability of not working by teaching them only functional life skills”. She noted that the persuasion of staff to align their work to QCAR was a “natural progression” from this and the team rewrote one year level general program, which included teaching, assessment and reporting, through teacher collaborative planning .

Carmel discussed the challenges of developing a teaching team that engages in collaborative planning and delivery and has common beliefs and actions. She describes the process of changing attitudes, practices and beliefs as “strangely being the hardest” with the SEP teachers. These teachers generally had a lack of curriculum knowledge and provided only small group programs based upon life skills. She has had to resort to challenging staff practice, attitudes and behaviors sometimes through ‘tough conversations’, the “Code of Conduct” (Department of Education) process and other human resource options such as offering transfers to teachers who were not willing to engage in work of the team. She also challenged school practices. For example, she was “outraged” that SWD were not offered to learn a foreign language. She made sure this offer was open to all students, providing support through co-teaching and planning. She recounted that the last student who won the year level language prize was a student with a disability. Carmel described how she “won over” staff by framing the discussion of changes to curriculum planning and delivery by explaining how the efficiencies of *P-12 Curriculum Framework* ( Queensland Government, 2008) would benefit them. This included arranging time for teachers to plan and creating curriculum leader positions who would lead the change

### *Relevant professional learning opportunities*

When discussing the issues related to policy implementation in education, Cohen -Baron (1993) noted that “...learning for the enactors is essential” (p. 208). This learning, also supported by the work of Fullan (2000) requires leaders to focus on the background and relevance of policy to teacher’s every day practice. Professional learning is a key process for sustaining change in assessment practice. Regardless of the mode of professional learning offered, teachers;



- must have time to reflect and to adjust their teaching to take on new practices,
- have learning activities spread over time with opportunities for trying out new, assessment ideas between sessions,
- and have opportunity to share their experiences with others.

(Gardner et al, 2007, p.11)

Carmel, the SEP and general education staff have and continue to spend much time in relevant professional learning to develop further the new mindset about students, curriculum planning and delivery. They work together to discuss the intent of the curriculum and how to assess student achievement. This in-depth discussion is necessary as every class with a SWD is co – taught by a SEP and general education teacher.

The improved achievement and certification of SWD at Carmel's school is acknowledged by district, state and regional staff. Carmel's forward planning preparing staff for the P-12 Framework provided her with a catalyst for a wide variety of changes to the planning, delivery and assessment processes within the school. She has implemented complex and relevant leadership skills that included all the suggestions of this report for successful enactment of policy that is continuing to improve achievement for SWD. Carmel continues to monitor her progress through critical analysis of documents, practices and professional learning activities. She invites feedback from teachers about her leadership and relational skills.

#### *Collaborative curriculum planning and delivery is arranged*

The need for a curriculum focus during successful collaboration provides the “philosophical shift necessary for moving away from the student as the problem to the curriculum as something teachers need to work with in relationship to the student” (Pugach & Warger, 2001, p. 195). Teachers who are effective teachers of SWD in mainstream classrooms, “routinely collaborated with colleagues, parents and other students” (Shaddock, et al, 2007, p. xii). Their research into effective collaboration in schools found that a critical factor was “school culture and ethos, particularly as mediated by the executive...” (p. xiv) influencing the success of collaboration.

The *P-12 Curriculum Framework* Guidelines for SWD (Queensland Government, 2008, p. 14) recommend that learning, teaching and assessment in secondary schools can be supported by

- co-teaching/team teaching
- collaborative team planning
- a school structure that provides time for planning and reflects a collaborative ‘team planning approach.

For schools to respond to the suggestions of success outlined in this discussion, teachers will need to see how they have been applied successfully in practice. As described earlier, academic commentary has called for the description of school contexts where effective policy implementation is occurring

resulting in increased achievement of students (Shaddock et al., 2007; Black & William, 2001).

Carmel describes professional learning as including in depth discussions about assessment. This in-depth discussion is necessary as every class with a SWD is co – taught by a SEP and general education teacher. As a team, these teachers need to collaboratively plan assessment and ensure that the student is the centre of the process. The SEP teacher takes on the role of the disability specialist who knows what adjustments are needed for the learners in the class and how to “universally design” tasks so that all learners can access them. The general education teacher takes on the role of curriculum specialist ensuring the rigor of the subject is maintained. Both teachers are in the classroom at the same time and are both expected to “actively teach”.

In regard to assessment, teachers plan a “range of options” for all learners to demonstrate their learning. Carmel describes a process where every child maintains a portfolio of work for every subject. They receive feedback about their achievement on every task in that portfolio and can “see how they are traveling” towards a particular mark overall – A,B,C,D, or E. They also have opportunity to re-submit some items after feedback for a “better mark”. The students then decide when they have completed their portfolio which items they will submit for final mark. The criteria for these assessment items are determined by the team of teachers and items are judged and moderated against the standard being assessed. The team has to be very explicit about what is being assessed and ensure teaching supports this. The students achievement is compared against their achievement of the standard not each other. The application of AfL in this example demonstrates how the student is at the centre of the process and the teachers’ beliefs and actions reflect this.

This article concludes with the suggestion that curriculum policy can provide schools with evidence – based directions as to how to improve achievement of SWD through the curriculum process. The challenge continues to be how does a school go about persuading teachers to change and meet the requirements of policy, even when it is based upon good evidence about effective practice? Combining this with other reforms such as the inclusive education agenda makes this even more complex. This article suggests that the answer to this challenge initially lies with the provision to schools and leaders examples of where curriculum and inclusive education policy is enacted successfully. The story of Carmel and how she has enacted the suggestions for success discussed in this article may prompt leaders to begin to meet this challenge.

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## Appendix a Curriculum for All

Name of Policy/legislation/statement	'Education for all' concept identified	Section
Disability Discrimination Act 1992, Education Standards, 2005.	The standards are based on the position that <b>all</b> students, including SWD, "should be treated with dignity and enjoy the benefits of education....on the same basis as students without disabilities" (2005, p.42)	Parts 4 to 8.
Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2008	Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence.  <b>All</b> students have access to high quality schooling (2008, p. 6).	Goal 1
Inclusive Education Statement, Queensland Government's, 2005.	The Statement outlines the commitment to excellence for <b>all</b> students.  Curriculum is intellectually challenging for <b>all</b> students and <b>all</b> students are provided with the teaching they need for success.	Education Queensland's commitment.  Indicators of Inclusive Education – Teaching and learning
CRP –PR- 009: Inclusive Education, Education Queensland, 2008	Inclusive education in Education Queensland supports <b>all</b> students. Maximizes educational and social outcomes of <b>all</b> students.  Embed principle that inclusive education is part of <b>all</b> Education Queensland school practices, for <b>all</b> students all through their schooling.	Statement of intent   Responsibilities All Education Queensland Staff
P-12 Curriculum Framework, Guidelines for Students with Disabilities.	All state schools will provide a curriculum to maximize the capacity of <b>all</b> students to achieve the essential learnings and standards, achieve certification and exit from schooling with the capabilities and values to be active and responsible citizens.	Policy Statement 1