Conference Paper:

The Australian Curriculum and Students with Vision Impairments:

Policies, Legislation and Strategies for Accessibility

Introduction

The Australian Curriculum offers a broad-based approach to the education of all Australian children, including those with diverse learning needs. Legislation such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2007) and policies such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) dictate that all students, including those with disabilities, must be able to fully access and participate in an educational curriculum on the same basis as their peers. Strategies such as the use of assistive technology, specialist teaching support and flexible approaches for teaching, learning and assessment allow for the personalisation of a students' learning whilst still engaging in the same curricular areas as their peers within the Australian Curriculum.

Overview of the Australian Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum has three dimensions: learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. The eight learning areas are comprised of English, mathematics, science, humanities and social sciences, the arts, technologies, health and physical education, and languages. Some learning areas contain more than one subject, such as the arts, which includes drama, dance, media arts, music and visual arts.

The Australian Curriculum ‘pays explicit attention to how seven general capabilities and three cross-curriculum priorities contribute to and can be developed through each

learning area' (ACARA, n.d.). The seven general capabilities are literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology, critical and creative thinking, personal and social, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding. Finally, the Australian Curriculum focuses on three cross-curriculum priorities: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and sustainability.

Policies on Accessibility

With a policy framework informed by the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), the Australian Curriculum is explicitly designed for appropriateness for all students. Key propositions such as those below form the foundations of the Australian Curriculum, and indicate the personalised approach that it seeks to support:

> that each student can learn and that the needs of every student are important; that each student is entitled to knowledge, understanding and skills that provide a foundation for successful and lifelong learning and participation in the Australian community; that high expectations should be set for each student as teachers account for the current level of learning of individual students and the different rates at which students develop; and that the needs and interests of students will vary, and that schools and teachers will plan from the curriculum in ways that respond to those needs and interests. (ACARA, 2012)

Such an approach is critical to the needs of students with disabilities, including those with vision impairments, who may experience a range of difficulties when attempting to access a mainstream curriculum (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002).

Research indicates that students with vision impairments, particularly those who read braille, tend to have lower levels of academic engagement and achievement than their sighted peers (Bardin and Lewis, 2011). Even students who do not have a disability but may have other differences, such as non-Western socio-cultural backgrounds or first languages other than English may also experience challenges within a mainstream curriculum (Shaw, 2011). Therefore, a flexible and responsive curriculum framework is required to meet the individual needs of students with differences effectively while acknowledging universal areas for learning and development, and maintaining high expectations for all.

Under the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006), teachers must ensure that students with disabilities can participate in the Australian Curriculum on the same basis as their peers, regardless of the educational setting or context. Rigorous, dignified and meaningful learning programs must be designed which meet the needs of these students, though this does not mean that they will have the same learning experiences. Rather, it allows for personalisation in the ways in which they access their learning as well as the focus of that learning according to their individual needs, strengths, goals and interests (ACARA, n.d.).

The 'Principles and Standards for the Education of Children and Youth with Vision Impairment, including those with Multiple Disabilities' provide clear direction regarding the provision of educational services and supports for students with vision impairments (South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment, 2004). These policies support the inclusion of the Expanded Core Curriculum (Hatlen, 1996) in the education of a child with vision impairments within a mainstream curriculum, and therefore the Australian Curriculum. They also support full access to learning materials and advocate for adequate school system staff training and development as well as the provision of trained specialist teachers in vision impairment.

Legislation Regarding Accessibility

The legislation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that students with disabilities must access, 'an inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others' with reasonable accommodations and the provision of required supports, which include 'effective, individualised support measures in environments that maximise academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion' (UN, 2007). It also specifically states that measures to enable the learning of life and social development skills must be undertaken, including,

> (*a*) Facilitating the learning of [b]raille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;
> (*b*) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;
> (*c*) Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual (UN, 2007).

The Disability Discrimination Act (Australian Government, 1992) details a range of unlawful discriminations against students with disabilities. These include 'developing curricula or training courses having a content that will either exclude the person from participation, or subject the person to any other detriment; or by accrediting curricula or training courses having such a content' (Australian Government, 1992). As an accredited curriculum, the Australian Curriculum must therefore accommodate the needs of all students, and ensure that the explicit teaching of braille and other vision impairment-specific learning areas is included in the education of a child with vision impairments. Meeting the specific

rights of a student with vision impairments within the framework of the Australian Curriculum requires significant personalisation, which includes the utilisation of the Expanded Core Curriculum (Hatlen, 1996) as well as the utilisation of specialist teachers of students with vision impairments and appropriate supports such as assistive technology.

Strategies for Personalisation

Personalisation of the Australian Curriculum to meet the needs of each student, especially those with vision impairments, may require a range of strategies. While some students with disabilities may require little to no adaptations in order to access curricular material, others may require significant levels of adaptation. Students with vision impairments fall within this spectrum, and may require the materials as well as the content to be personalised within the confines of 'reasonable accommodation' (UN, 2007).

A critical aspect of curricular access for students with vision impairments is the inherent difficulty with print and visual materials. With the right technology, determined by an Assistive Technology Assessment (Presley and D'Andrea, 2011), students can personalise the print information they receive into their preferred alternate format such as large print or electronic braille. For visual information such as film clips, accompanying this material with audio description and hands-on materials may assist in their understanding of the visual aspects of the film. Concerning graphics, tactile diagrams made using equipment such as a PIAF machine, braille embosser or Thermoform embosser will enable tactual access of visual pictures, charts and graphs. Low-tech approaches such as spur wheels and Wiki-sticks may also provide good tactual access to visual information.

The ability to access visually based material hinges on the specialist teaching the student receives in regards to their braille reading, tactual graphics interpretation, and assistive technology skills in addition to the provision of accessible materials. It is critical

that specialist teachers receive sufficient training and support (Kesiktas & Akcamete, 2001), including the learning of assistive technologies well enough to understand and be able to recommend and teach them to students (Li, Ajuwon, Smith, Griffin-Shirley, Parker, & Okungu, 2012). Similarly, appropriate funding needs to be made available to purchase the right technology as well as provide training, regular maintenance and upgrades, and adequate staffing to produce materials. Funding such as the *More Support for Students with Disabilities National Partnership* received by the Statewide Vision Resource Centre in Victoria in 2012-2013 is critically important for the provision of such technologies as well as for the training for teachers, families and students (Lewis, 2013).

Direct teaching from specialist teachers in vision impairment is another important aspect of enabling students with vision impairments, to gain the skills, knowledge and behaviours necessary to access the curriculum. This specialist teaching should focus on the teaching of the Expanded Core Curriculum (Hatlen, 1996), which is separate yet integrative curriculum designed for students with vision impairments. It teaches the skills, knowledge and behaviours needed for students to fully access the mainstream curriculum, participate in the life of their school, and prepare for life post-graduation (Wolffe & Kelly, 2011).

Students who have disabilities or differences which significantly affect their learning may need to focus more intensively on three of the integral ‘general capabilities’ of the curriculum – Literacy, Numeracy, and Personal and Social capability. While these are not an alternative curriculum to the seven main learning areas, they can support the access to and progress through the learning areas by students with disabilities (ACARA, n.d.). Ensuring that the content of teaching and learning programs are developed from age-equivalent learning areas will enable individual learning needs to be met at an appropriate level for each student. Additional levels at Level 1 for Literacy, Numeracy and Personal and Social

Capability demonstrates inclusion of the ability levels and needs of students who may be functioning at a pre-intentional stage of development.

Curriculum modifications are effective for increasing the levels of engagement and success for students with disabilities (Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010). By applying the principles of universal design to teaching within the Australian Curriculum, teachers can create learning opportunities that allow access to all (Shaw, 2011). These three principles include the provision of:

> • multiple means of representation, to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge;
> • multiple means of action and expression, to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know; [and]
> • multiple means of engagement, to tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, n.d.).

For mainstream teachers with a student with vision impairments, this could mean presenting visual information aurally, tactually, or in large print or braille. An example of a different mean of action and expression could be a student with vision impairments completing a line drawing assignment by using a tactile drawing board. By creating learning activities with appropriate challenges, such as permitting the student with vision impairments to learn goalball instead of badminton in physical education, the teacher would provide multiple means of engagement, using a meaningful activity of interest to increase student motivation and learning within the mainstream curriculum.

The provision of professional development and training to mainstream teachers who have a student with vision impairments is also a critical component in the accommodation of

these students within the Australian Curriculum. Mainstream teachers require professional development in order to understand the unique needs of students with vision impairments and how include them in the curriculum (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). This professional development is often provided by the specialist teacher of students with vision impairments (Brown & Beamish, 2012), though adequate time must be provided for this professional learning as well as for the direct teaching of students with vision impairments (Suvak, 2004).

Summary

The Australian Curriculum provides a broad and comprehensive framework for the learning and development of all Australian students, including those with disabilities. This accessibility is legislated by the national (Australian Government, 1992) and international law (UN, 2007) and supported by policies such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006), and the Principles and Standards for the Education of Children and Youth with Vision Impairments, including those with Multiple Disabilities (SPEVI, 2004). Utilisation of flexible teaching and learning approaches, including universal design principles and assistive technology, in addition to the Expanded Core Curriculum (Hatlen, 1996) and specialist teachers in vision impairment, will permit students with vision impairments the same access to the Australian Curriculum as their peers.

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