



MISMATCH: SPECIAL EDUCATION LEARNERS AND EQAO

BY LAURIE MENARD

“... standardized testing, while bad news across the board, is especially hurtful to students who need our help the most” .

— Kohn, *Education Week*, 2000

In our schools today, assessment and evaluation of students is the result of a carefully integrated process of “planning, acting, assessing and reflecting” on student progress and achievement. Teachers are expected to plan for student learning based on principles of differentiation and focus on inquiry based learning. The Ministry of Education describes a teacher’s responsibility to their students:

Differentiated instruction is based on the idea that because students differ significantly in their strengths, interests, learning styles and readiness to learn, it is necessary to adapt instruction to suit these differing characteristics. One or a number of the following elements can be differentiated in any classroom-learning situation:

- The content of learning (What students are going to learn, and when);
- The process of learning (the types of tasks and activities);
- The products of learning (the ways in which students demonstrate learning);
- The affect/environment of learning (the context and environment in which students learn and demonstrate learning).

(*Learning For All*, 2013, pg. 17)

For students with special learning needs, it is critical that teachers know the learner and understand how they demonstrates understanding. Rarely is this demonstration optimally shown through a one-time paper and pencil assessment given over hours on consecutive days.

But with EQAO testing, students are usually expected to engage in this test for an extended period of time throughout the day and for a number of days working in both mathematics and literacy. This format does not correspond to how teachers are expected to teach or how students learn and are assessed. Despite school staff working to reduce the impact of this high stress situation, students are significantly affected by the situation, and the expectations that don’t match their daily educational experience.

Teachers assess the learning of the whole child (ETF0, 2010). Based on their understanding of the individual’s learning profile they use the assessment information gleaned to formulate next steps for each learner. The sterile, standardized EQAO test format and its results are not useful in the support of special education students, and can have adverse effects.

First, EQAO is not an inclusive form of assessment, and unfairly disadvantages students who have learning challenges. Teachers need to develop a healthy relationship with their students where students can predictably expect assessment measures that align with classroom practice and that consider their learning needs. When assessment measures match student learning needs,

then we provide a level playing field for all. When students are not able to access the type of assessment — and therefore cannot demonstrate their learning satisfactorily — the important relationship between teacher and student is defeated. For students with special learning needs, their trust in the teacher is key in building their confidence, encouraging them to continue engaging and in knowing they can have an impact on their environment — and that they are being successful.

Second, it's important to ask whether it is possible for a standardized assessment such as EQAO to measure what students learn if it does not match how they learn and demonstrate their learning throughout the year in class. If the answer is no, we need to question the stated purpose of this “test” — to provide data to inform teachers in next steps for their students. So, we have a test that not only does not provide an opportunity for special education students to appropriately demonstrate what they have learned, but it also does not give teachers authentic data to direct where to make their next best move to support progress and achievement. It seems that for many special education students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know is largely not possible through the EQAO format and therefore not inclusive.

Third, let's look at the potential effects of both the anticipation of and participation in the test on special education students. Test anxiety affects a student's ability to access information and to express their ideas. When anxiety is high, emotion regulation diverts important cognitive resources needed to respond to test questions (Hirsch, 2016). Worry, fear of failure, and dread are emotions that consume working memory and reduce a student's ability to maintain attention, to think and respond (Hirsch, 2016). Students with special learning needs often already have difficulty with issues such as planning, organizing, and sequencing information (executive functions) and capacity for holding and using information. Add the anxiety from not only the anticipation of the “test” but also actually trying to complete test questions, and the result can be no work production or weak work production that does not demonstrate what they have learned — and does not respect the integrity of the learner.

A fourth concern of significance that relates to each of the former points is that during EQAO testing, students are not able to access the accommodations they typically have during assessment activities. It's true that during the EQAO test they have certain accommodations that pertain to use of technology (voice to text and text to voice for some questions), a quiet space if needed and scribing when appropriate, but they are not able to have support for clarification of questions, repeated instructions, and redirection when they struggle with attention. Accommodations that do not affect curriculum expectations are a right that students have and

this stance is supported by our education system. Essentially for those students who have Individual Education Plans, standardized testing does not align with their accommodations or learning goals.

Finally, teachers of grades 3 and 6 spend considerable amounts of time preparing students throughout the year for the test and, as the time draws nearer in the spring, to understand the test format and answer questions posed in this way. The focused time spent for this purpose takes away from precious time needed to engage in differentiated instruction to help all learners meet their learning goals. It is already challenging to find adequate amounts of time in the instructional day to instruct, coach and shape each learner's experience. The time consumed by test preparation activities would be better used to cultivate rich learning opportunities for all students and to enhance the learning of those who struggle with curriculum expectations.

In summary, EQAO testing has little relevance to how students learn and demonstrate their learning in today's classroom where inquiry-based instruction and differentiation are hallmarks of good practice. For many special education students, the EQAO creates anxiety that can clearly affect their state of mind and result in poor performance. Moreover, it leaves them “out of the loop” in terms of an inclusive approach to assessment and evaluation. That time spent by teachers in test preparation is better spent focusing on developing learning and assessment measures that actually lead to a healthy classroom experience and authentic data to direct next steps for students.

Unless assessment for students with special education needs reflects what is happening in the classroom, the message to students is unclear and unpredictable. This is likely to lead to anxiety and poor performance — and we are left with a standardized assessment tool that does not support our education system in understanding how to create changes that meet the needs of special education learners. ●

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