

- Haley Tancredi: Welcome to making inclusion happen. In this episode of making inclusion happen, Associate Professor Jill Willis from QUT interviews two middle leaders who've been involved in the Accessible assessment ARC Linkage Project. Associate Professor Jill Willis joins us from the School of Teacher Education and Leadership here at QUT. Her research investigates how learners navigate performance expectations in assessment systems. Learners of all ages can be supported to experience greater success and agency. This interest has led her to teach about assessment, for learning, leadership, for change, and research in areas such as assessment, learning spaces, and middle leadership. Anne Camilla is the Head of English Department at Kedron State High School. She has a wide and varied teaching career of over 30 years duration. But it is her current role that she has been able to best indulge her true love of collaborating with others to design curriculum and pedagogy which enact real change in the way that students see themselves as learners. Matt Pickersgill began teaching secondary English drama in 2006. Since then, he has had various roles such as literacy coach, senior schooling, head of department, and since 2017, his current role as Benowa State High School's English Head of Department. He's passionate about curriculum and its ability to extend students skills and knowledge. In 2016, he was seconded to QCAA, taking on the role of manager of assessment, working on initial external assessment trials and accreditation.
- Jill Willis: It's a lovely pleasure to be together again. We've done so much work together over the last few years, Anne Matt, this is so cool. I think middle leadership, and I know you've both been middle leaders for a long time. Well, maybe not a long time. We're just young people, aren't we? Do you want to just tell me a little bit about what your job is and how it is a middle leader job.
- Anne Camillar: Okay. I don't know that I've told you this. I'm actually changing role at the moment because our HOD of teaching and learning is going off on maternity leave. I've said 'oh, that'll be a nice change' and just provide, I think, more opportunity to spread the word about the work that we've been doing and embedding it across the school. I have been the English HOD at Kedron for eight years time to try something new. Prior to that, I did my time as a year level coordinator and literacy coordinator at my previous school. So, I've been in middle leadership for quite some time, probably all up or maybe 12, 14 years, that sort of thing.
- Jill: A little while. And just for those people who may not know what a HOD is, that is a Head of Department, you've been head of English for a while and now you're going to be head of everybody. I like that.
- Anne: Yes. I'll get to put my bossy boots on.
- Jill: Matt, what about you? How long have you been a middle leader?
- Matt Pickersgill: I started doing literacy coordinator in a similar way to Anne. That would have been maybe 2014. Then I was this senior schooling head of department for a couple of years. I really want curriculum as my end goal. I did that for a few years and then I jumped ship and then I became the English Head of Department. And I've been that since about 2017, so 6 or 7 years.

Jill: Okay. I can remember being a head of department quite early in my teaching career because I actually thought I could tell people what to do and do it better. I'll get a bit frustrating when sometimes people weren't doing what I needed them to do. I also, I remember I had a really motley crew of people who were teaching one subject and they weren't specialists in my area. It was actually a lot more challenging than I thought it would be. I'm wondering how many people are in your department at the moment. Matt.

Matt: It really fluctuates a little bit, but the average is about 40 English teachers, and that could be a teacher who has just one English and the rest PE or Science. It could be somebody who's on a full load of five English classes.

Jill: Yeah. What about you, Anne?

Anne: Yeah, if I go by my Fac A role that I make everyone sign at meetings, it's about 35-40.

Jill: So, you're coordinating 35 or 40 people to do good things to achieve great student outcomes. What we want to do today is get into the nitty gritty of some of the ways that you'd like to influence teachers so that they can continue to do good things and learn from each other. We're really interested in accessibility and inclusion, and that's what we've been working together for a few years now. Influencing other people happens sometimes because, I know you're both great English teachers and you inspire people. It happens because you coordinate meetings and timetables, and class sets of resources and other things. I'm wondering what have been some of the opportunities you've had as a middle leader. Or if it's too hard to think of at the moment on school holidays about the good things, maybe even you want to start with a challenge, but a challenge and an opportunity about being a middle leader. Matt, I'll start with you.

Matt: One of the challenges is that influence. And when you're able to, I guess, use that influence to turn it into action and you want to actually see some change in the faculty, that can be difficult sometimes and you need to go through it yourself before you expect anybody else to do it. It's a very important part, that genuine approach. One of the opportunities, I guess, has probably been the project that we've been on with this accessible assessment, because it was directly tied to our English curriculum. It became part of our every day business where we really rethought assessment from the ground up. Even if teachers weren't directly involved in that change, they experienced it in that second hand way and now we've gotten more people comfortable with those ideas. Influence, is very challenging sometimes, you need to think about it in waves. There's that first wave of influence and then there's that second wave. That second wave influence is sometimes more powerful because it's the people who won't come on board very quickly, but they're the people when they change that's pretty powerful.

Jill: That's so true. Because I think when you're a department, you're not all sitting together all of the time. As you've said, people come with lots of different experience. Not only the discipline experience, but how many years they've been teaching. Getting to get peers, influencing peers is pretty powerful. I think that's what I heard you talking about with those waves. Is that similar to your experience, Anne?

- Anne: Absolutely. I think my first couple of years as a hod I ran around and did absolutely everything myself and worked insanely long hours. And then but as part of that process was identifying who I could call on because I didn't have, when I took on the role, there were no subject like year level coordinators. And slowly, over time, through being very gentle, because you've got nothing to offer them. You can't say, Hayley, come be my subject coordinator and do extra work, but I won't be giving you any time or any extra pay. There's no real benefit other than you get the chance to influence other people, and gradually, and it took time. But now I have a subject coordinators. I don't have to do all the influencing. And it's also not so top down because they're all teachers. So, the subject coordinators are influencing their team to do things the way that we've agreed we want them to be done. And it's not me standing up there with a big stick saying, hey, you're not doing things the way that you were told to. So, I think that's a really powerful way of distributive leadership. If I want to use big work, which we all do because English HODs, so that opportunity, it's just a benefit to everybody because you're giving autonomy to teaching staff and making them middle, middle leaders. Also, it means that I've got less that I have to worry about. And I very strongly encourage them to manage up and remind me when things like this task sheet needs to be out. And all of that just administrative stuff that takes some of the cognitive load from me which is really beneficial.
- Jill: I think you've reminded me of my beginning as a head of department just thinking I had to do it all myself. If I just give people things, they will do it. Boy, did I learn that that is actually not going to be sustainable for me. It's not influential for other people.
- Anne: People end up not exactly resenting you, but just like you're the one who's always telling them that they need to do things better or differently, or the way that I want them to. Whereas if you've got that, if you can distribute that through people who are also classroom teachers, full time classroom teachers. It's a hearts and minds thing.
- Jill: It's something that's really particular about middle leadership. You do have some power. You can say, I want you to do this for this reason and I am a line supervisor. But, that doesn't get you very far. Influence is that softer use of power, through expertise, through encouragement, through recognition, through role modelling, which are all of the positive ways that you get a group of people working together and setting a vision. Sometimes middle leaders can find it challenging when people are not doing the best practice, let's say. Or even doing terrible practice, and you've got to challenge it. A lot of the research says that's probably some of the harder work of being a middle leader. You're nodding yes, no need to name names or anything, but what have you learned about influencing, to bring new practice, sometimes when it's uncomfortable or you've got to directly challenge somebody's poorer practice.
- Matt: It's always hard. That's never easy. One of the things that has had some traction is doing some units where we've designed the lessons and assessment collaboratively as a team. Of course, that means that the people who are most passionate, who want to bring forward their ideas, they do, and they probably do the heavy lifting here. However, through that collaborative designed unit that

brings that person who maybe their practice is not quite up to speed or it's a little bit not best practice in many ways. It brings them a bit more on board and it gives them some wins that are more up to date with how students engage with English curriculum, for example. That becomes a really good baseline for a lot of conversations. When it comes to the next unit, we say, well, what worked in that last unit and how did you find that? Now those conversations are still tricky, but at least it gives you a common reference point because that's what's really important. Sometimes starting those conversations without a common baseline of this is what we expect quality teaching to be. You can be talking a completely different language to a person and they come with so many different experiences that are not like yours and not like what you've seen in the classroom. I think that has helped me in many cases, doesn't make it easy, but it does help.

Jill: I think that courage of doing hard work together is a really important one. Viv Robinson, when she writes about leadership, talks about trust gets built by doing that hard work together. You don't build trust and then do the hard work, you do the hard work together. And that's what builds those trust bonds.

Anne: It's a complex question, but I think that the most important place to start is it's always going to be about what's best for students. Very few teachers will argue back if you are framing what you're asking them to do in terms of this is what's going to be best for the kids. All of that influence is far easier with your immediate team, the ones who are in your staff room. The trickiest situations I've found is when it's people who I don't see every day, they're not privy to lunchtime conversations because we put a real priority in our staff room about trying to eat together and just stop and pause and because that's where we have our really good conversations. But for people who aren't in our staff room, they don't get to be part of that and they're probably the most difficult to reach. But again, my subject coordinators because they're having those conversations with the teachers about what they're teaching and through the OneNote that also has a secondary influence and I have great hopes of Q-Learn having a similar, similar influence as it rolls out. But that's more the pathway when it's teachers that you don't get to really see and interact with all the time.

Jill: To share practice, shared resources, just shared time together to listen and to support and to hear what quality looks like. Even if it's quality planning, that time together is really important. And I guess you've got key roles in making that happen. I want to move to this idea about accessibility in particular, and some of the things that you are learning about. Matt, when we started working with you, one way that the department was organised was into classes that you may not have called them streaming, but that might have been the effect where you had your high achievers working together and kids who are probably going on to more vocational English in senior were probably working together earlier. That's something that you've changed. It's a really common practice that I see in lots of schools. Why have you changed? Can you tell us why?

Matt: It was a very um, very strong community expectation that we do that as well. The parents, the students and they still wanted in many ways. However, we were seeing, the data was showing that it wasn't working. That especially for students who were maybe just passing, their results weren't improving,

particularly in year 9 and 10 that's where we saw a real dip there. It wasn't getting the outcomes that we expected. The reason it was being done that way was the idea that differentiation is so complex and so difficult. If we removed the need to differentiate to so many levels and we can target certain levels per class, that it would make the life of the teacher easier. That didn't come about. That was the intention, but it was very hard to see that in practice. If anything, it just made the gap.. I wouldn't say the gap increased, but the gap didn't close. Through this project, we realised that that's not best practice because students aren't seeing quality from students as much because of that. And, actually there's this psychological thing and we try to get it across, to overcome it through moderation and calibration. But there is this psychological bell curving that every teacher will do no matter what class is put in front of them, and you can see it in the way that they grade. It doesn't matter if we had streamed classes where this was just a class of A to B of standard responses from that group of students. It would end up getting the spectrum all the way down to even sometimes you'd have to question that. So, it is interesting going through that and we've done that and we've found that it didn't work. Now we've gone to the other side of this and where we have those more diverse and inclusive classes that has had a positive impact on behaviour. Teachers feel like their classes are easier to work with, that they're, they're having a better time in terms of behaviour. Especially in a lot of classes where a lot of learners who English is not their thing, they're having a better time with those students and bringing them on board, the achievement has improved as well. The challenging part is still differentiation though, because there is still, and I'm getting this from parent and student feedback, there's still a feeling that, well, I'm being left out, I'm not in the class that's right for me. I do a lot of conversations to recalibrate that and talk about the benefits and actually look at the evidence in the student's work because that's what's great about electronic marking, now I can see everything, and I can go, well, actually they've done a really great job here and their work has improved from last year. That evidence-based conversation does help re-challenge the expectations and re-calibrate things, but it's still a challenge. Teachers do feel like sometimes they aren't getting to everyone in the classroom and everybody's level and that's the work that we still have to do.

Jill: I loved hearing you talk about very human things like quality is something that you see every day. If you can't see it in your peers work and you can't aspire, you don't know how to get there. But even that judging quality and evaluating quality, we do that by saying this is better than that. And that human bell curve stuff, even though we'll fight against it, is part of how we make decisions about what's good and what's better, what's best. It's so lovely to hear you talk about how evidence has informed your rethinking, but also you re-articulating culture and the expectations to parents, to teachers, to students. You're not fully finished investigating and inquiring about differentiating, but you're able to focus on what it is that you need to keep working on together as a team by the sound of that.

Matt: Yeah, and certainly this focus on accessibility has really helped because it does come from that universal design language, kind of, philosophy, which does take a lot of the pressure off differentiation. Differentiation was this magical word

that everybody was using, that was just some cure all. But nobody actually could tell you what it looked like. They could give you some examples, three levels and operating for three levels, and all of those things, really intricate plans. And those that created a workload impost. And what teachers ended up doing with differentiation was as much one on one time as possible to fill gaps in the classroom. That's also a workload impost. And that's emotionally really draining for the teacher having to go around and put out every spot fire in the classroom. With this accessibility principle, it's saying that, well, actually this is rigorous work. We're going to make it as inclusive and accessible from the get go. We're not going to have any extra hurdles or hoops. And then we're going to show students we'll here are different levels of quality. Now we're going to work to those different levels of quality. It is a rethinking, it's a lot of work to go through that journey and change that way, but I can see how it's improving and it is changing the types of conversations we're having in the faculty. I think in five years time it's going to be working really well.

Jill: I like you've got the long term view because this involves changing expectations, changing practice, changing some systems. It's not all going to happen in ten weeks. Yeah. But I think that focus on what does quality look like and how do we make it accessible for everybody are two linchpins that you've brought to us. Thank you, Matt. Anne, I'm going to ask you a question about something in your school because your schools really unusual in the way that you've used structures to, you know, some kids are doing some subjects a year above their year level. You've got a big EAL/D population. You've been thinking about inclusion for a long time. How has your school refined what they've been doing around inclusive education in the recent years? Can you tell us what you've been doing to help that refinement?

Anne: Sure. We have come from a place of very fine grain streaming as well. Our journey has really been about the hearts and minds for staff and parents and students around seeing that inclusive, that's just not an inclusive way of doing things. I think that we see Version 9, like the rollover into Version 9 of the Australian Curriculum is a really good opportunity to actually embed that all of the ideas that we've learned through QUT in what we do in Q-Learn will be a big part of that. It just gives us an opportunity to enact real change in making sure that everything that we do is inclusive. I think we've been honing our skills. We're getting much better at what a reasonable adjustment might look like and what tailored supports might look like. But I think that the shift in our attitude towards assessment and assessment task sheets, as being towards, towards it being an invitation for students to show us what they know has been a really important one. Just that the universal design idea that we can open that task up so that students at a range of abilities can use that, what we're asking them to do to demonstrate what they know is a really important part of that. Because there's less need for differentiation if you have students who are engaged because they feel they have autonomy over what they're doing, or in what they're doing. And I think that it just opens up that, I mean, we used to think you'd have a task with three tiers and there was the A standard or the really hard task, and then the slightly easier task and then the entry level if you like. But it's been through our work with QUT that we've realised that that's actually the

worst way of going about it. Because you just then closing down students. And the C student thinks, right, I'm doing the C task because I'm a C student. Even if they could quite possibly do one of the more difficult ones. At Kedron we did that in a way that we were saying you don't have to, you can choose whichever task you want, but of course kids self select. So, yeah, now that we know that making the task as broad as possible allows all students to demonstrate the level that they're capable of, that's become a really important concept for us.

Jill: I think assessment is an interesting one to work on, isn't it? Because it matters to kids. It matters to parents. It's where a lot of teacher energy goes and listening to you both, I'm hearing that changing the mindset around what assessment is about, not trying to measure kids perhaps, but to really invite them into showing what quality could look like, um, is probably saving a bit of teacher energy along the way as well. I know it's hard to set up, but maybe if you're not feeling guilty and you're not running around doing lots of individual plans, but you're thinking more holistically and you're getting kids teacher peers onboard to think about this together. It might feel a little bit more achievable and more sustainable for teachers.

Anne: I think particularly also our work in making sure that task sheets have what we hear in our project call Steps for Success, which is making sure that students know exactly what they need to do, when. O, one order of things that kids can follow, particularly students with learning and attentional difficulties. That takes so much of the cognitive load away from them, but it also takes a lot of the work away from the teacher because you're not having to tell each individual student how they should be approaching the task. It's also allowed us to at a Kedron to embed our whole school literacy programme because that's the structure that underpins our approach to the steps for success. So, that's making sure anyone who's worked with literacy knows that actually getting the whole school onboard is a mammoth challenge. But if every task sheet keeps front and centre for teachers and students alike, what we're trying to do with our literacy, then that ticks that box as well.

Jill: I like the way you're coordinating whose school work from your department. That's a good managing up. Because in these experiences, in this innovation that you're doing and you're finding success, I think there's opportunities for you to not only influence the teachers in your department, but others, influencing other departments, perhaps your school. I know you've been influencing other schools, even this is exciting. How do you do that? How do you take some of your successes and influence up? It could be you need something to change from the executive leader level to make this possible. Or you just think this is, this is so good for kids, this is so good for teachers. We need to do more of this elsewhere. Anne, you've mentioned folding in a literacy policy, we can use that. Have you got any other ideas for people who are maybe wanting to manage up or influence up?

Anne: I think for the most part, in my experience, the executive leadership team and other executive leadership teams that I've worked with, it really is about if you can say, this is what's best for the kids and this is why. And use that evidence base and use what you know and use your own passion for what you're doing that is really influential. And I don't think there's too many leadership teams who

are going to, you want to do this project that's going to improve outcomes for students and make, reduce workload for teachers in the long run. Nah. (Laughing). A lot of the time what you're suggesting is a dream for them and something that they would be really interested in being on board with. I'm sure you would have had the same experience with the teams that you've worked with yet.

Jill: Some people are more ready to hear than others at different times. I think it takes repeating the story and there is that using the student stories and student examples is powerful. Matt, what about you? What have you found as you're influencing others?

Matt: I definitely think the phased rollout approach helps with having entry points that go frequently with retelling the successes that allow more people to jump on board. And then you've got a bigger pool to draw the success from, and then more people. And that's what we're trying to do at the moment. We've now got three faculties quite formally involved, and we've got maybe two informally. And the challenges to get to everybody. It is really challenging sometimes in high school and secondary education when you have the silo effect and that's quite strong in many schools, and I think in some ways it's quite strong at my school. That means that in many ways, the silo effect comes about because there is this strong subject based expertise within the faculties and there's this almost territorial feeling that we control this, we own this, and that's a fantastic thing that ownership. But it can be hard to break through sometimes when challenging some practices that have just been occurring as routine for a long time. Those practices I'm talking about inaccessible hurdles or just extra things that are making this difficult for students. They're just embedded and they're every day. Some teachers will say, oh but, I explain that, but I teach that. Of course they do. Of course they do. I will never believe that to exist as a teacher in 2023, in a secondary school, you are working hard. Your very existence means that you are working hard. But it's what parts of that working hard are unnecessary and what can we actually, through design and through a shared assessment practice, and policy and belief system, we can actually reinvent things, so that you are putting your energy in places that are going to have much more impact rather than having to constantly re-explain. And that's the story that I'm trying to tell everybody right now because I've been through it myself and I feel like I'm on the other side now. My own teaching, just for my own Year 9 English class, it feels so much easier because I've unwound some things that were tightening everybody up. There were knots that I was having to disentangle constantly in the classroom. There were knots that students were having to disentangle when they deciphered, what am I on about now? It's simpler and it's clearer and the students are responding and they're doing better because of it. The work is still incredibly rigorous. It's still the Australian Curriculum Year 9 level, but more students are being able to access that effectively in those discerning levels because we've just made the barriers, well we've tried to get rid of them all. We've tried to make it really, really clear what students have to do, how they have to do it. The steps for success are linked to classroom practice. We've got success criteria that links to that. I just feel like if only I could go back and tell my first year teach yourself all of these things. But, we learn these things as we go,

don't we.

Jill: I think that's what's impressed me about you both. You are learners and you are making sure that your department that you lead is a learning environment. We're open to hearing things, we're open to trying new things, but you also collect evidence along the way. So it's a really intentional environment of co-learning together. And you've picked accessibility and we focused on assessment as a focus because those are two things that we've seen can make a really powerful difference. I'm just wondering as we finish up our conversation today, if you're thinking of other Heads of Department, have you got any final words of wisdom that you'd like to share about how to lead for accessibility and inclusion? Is there some thing that you have learned as you reflect back on our learning time together.

Anne: I think abandoning your preconceived notions is really, and really looking at what you do, trying to look at what you do with fresh eyes. Because we get caught up, particularly when we're so busy, you get caught up in doing things the quickest and shortest way that you can while still producing quality. And a lot of the time things that you're doing, you're not even examining them and asking yourself why you're doing them. Everyone here will know that I'm really talking about task sheets where you've got so much on your task sheet, that three odd years ago, someone decided that we needed to have a plagiarism declaration. But no one ever reads it, no one ever signs it. We have turned it in. It's completely, it's that little dinosaur tail. It's just taking up room on the task sheet. But don't stop and take the time to think 'mmm, possibly we could get rid of that' and we could get rid of the thing that all of the bits that aren't serving a purpose and all of the things that are a distraction for the kids, even if they're the things that you really like. Like the pretty picture. (Laughing). And, that, even another one, that everyone has heard this story 100 times, the complexity of the language that we feel like we need to model this beautiful, rich language on a task sheet. That's not where it should be being modelled. The language on a task sheet should be as simple and straightforward as it possibly can be, so that the students can understand exactly what it is that the task sheet is saying.

Jill: I think that purposeful, intentional thinking. And, I like the way that you're saying, look at things with fresh eyes. Matt, something that you're doing to help keep those eyes fresh. I think you've got a partnership with another HOD, somewhere in your school where you ask them to check, give you a fresh take on something that may be really familiar for you.

Matt: Yeah, this is something we're trialling and we want to expand it. But that idea of a critical friends network, which is that outside eyes. Because sometimes I get blindsided by my own curriculum and I'm too deep in it to see from the outside of what does that mean and could that actually be simpler. It's meant a bit of checking an English task sheet with another head of department or another teacher from outside and then doing the reverse as well. That's led to some good conversations, some really good conversations about what doesn't need to be there, what's not assessed, what's not in the curriculum. What are these extra things that we're getting the students to do that are kind of a bit superfluous? That can be a tough conversation at first, but if we've got those norms of this is what a critical friend does and we're trying to work on that at our school. That

can become maybe a routine check in that I'm hoping that maybe term we have a critical friend network where you sit with somebody from outside of your faculty. You share a task sheet that's maybe for the next term. And you just get to see their perspective because they've got the teaching expertise, they've got a similar assessment literacy, but they've got that different subject expertise which is great. They can articulate things in ways that can help us get outside of our own bubble. Then there's the idea of actually when you can, even taking it to students and testing it with students. And we've done that, we've done it formally through the QUT project, but formally as well. And that's really powerful. It's sometimes hard to elicit some really detailed responses from them. They just want to say, yeah, it's good, but when you can say why, ask them why, and keep going and expand, I had a group of maybe seven or eight year nine students where I showed them a year ten task that they were going to do next year. I wanted their thoughts, I got some good insights. And it was a good way to change a few little things before we rolled it out. Then they went in, they actually did that task. Think, I don't know, I need to go and find those students again and say, now that you've done that, did you feel like that was good having some input? We'll see.

Jill: Is there any other advice you want to give to other HODs about how to do this inclusive work that you've been working on for the last.

Anne: The other thing that we have going in our school, which is a really powerful programme, is that we have literacy champions and pedagogy champions from one, from each faculty, and then we get together as a team. That's been really useful to give that bird's eye view of how things are. As Matt said, we operate in silos and we're familiar with the way that we do things. And we think that a certain change can easily be made because in English it wouldn't be a big deal, but in math that might be an enormous, like, it's a deal breaker, but you can't do it. Having teams of people who can each bring their faculties perspective to the table and to the work that we're doing, and, so that you can balance the faculty needs with trying to be consistent with a whole school program has been really useful. Very powerful for us.

Jill: It's part of the whole school culture.

Matt: Yeah, I would say another piece of advice would just be to have that slow rollout in mind. Never try to do anything within a term or even a year. You want your goals, your milestones, but you need to kind of, any real change is going to take probably three years.

Anne: Yeah.

Jill: That is so tricky. Often we become middle leaders because we're great teachers and we like teaching and we want to be doing more of that and in teaching, you plan minute, minute to day when you became a HOD, I don't know if it was like this view. All of a sudden you couldn't get everything done. There's no way you can do all of the jobs that are on your to do list. You have to choose what is the best work to do, what is going to achieve the most. I think what you've talked about today with us is some of the ways that other middle leaders can think about rolling out inclusion and accessibility, whether it's at the assessment task sheet level, whether it's at a team meeting, whether it's advocating for whole



school change. Thank you both for all of the brilliant work you've done in your schools and in the project, but also for spending holiday time chatting about it today.

Anne: It's a pleasure to have a with you.
Matt: Thank you
Jill: Yeah, it's been fun. Thank you so much.