

The world of SEN

Welcome to Module 1 of your SEN toolkit!

In this module we will introduce you to the world of SEN and help you understand the key challenges and impacts.

Aims

By the end of this module, I will be able to:

- recognise the core issues surrounding SEN
- apply how you think about core SEN issues in relation to your own context
- understand that SEN impacts on a variety of different stakeholders and that these stakeholders also impact on SEN



Understanding SEN

We may sometimes feel that we look at Special Educational Needs from a position of being completely lost, and having so small an understanding of such a big topic that progressing towards proficiency in the subject is intimidating, or even overwhelming. But most of the time it's not as bad as that, we do have some idea of what we're dealing with, and we can use this as a basis for going forwards.

Find some post-it notes. On each post-it note, write down one thing you associate with the phrase “Special Educational Needs”. This could be something as simple as: “needs special help in education”, but at this stage, write down whatever comes to mind. Try to come up with at least seven things, written onto separate post-its (therefore, at least seven post-its). Just take two minutes to do this. Once you’ve finished, collect the notes, review what you’ve written, and put them somewhere safe.

Student quotes

Now, we know that teaching can often be hugely rewarding, and that you’re in it for the welfare and development of your students; but we understand also that your wellbeing as a teacher is just as important as anybody else’s.

Look at these quotations. They are all from students (and former students) with Special Educational Needs. Sort them into three piles:

Pile A	Pile B	Pile C
What SEN students have said about me (or: what I believe any SEN students of mine have thought about me)	What has probably not been said about me, but which I would like SEN students to think about me in the future, and which are achievable, once I have gained some more understanding of Special Educational Needs	What has probably not been said about me, which I would like SEN students to think about me in the future, but which I think are unachievable

<p><i>1. My teacher was very explicit with her instructions. Only then was I able to follow what she meant. I did really well in her classes.</i></p>	<p><i>2. My teacher listened to me.</i></p>	<p><i>11. All my teacher did was find out how I learnt best, and let me concentrate on that.</i></p>	<p><i>12. Mr Foster was the only teacher who didn't call me lazy, or tell me I should have tried harder. I hated that.</i></p>
<p><i>3. My teacher encouraged me all the way from the start to the finish, even when I couldn't get the same grades my classmates were getting.</i></p>	<p><i>4. I remember reading out loud in class once, and getting the words wrong. Mr Daggett immediately stopped asking me to read out loud.</i></p>	<p><i>13. With Mrs Gonzales, learning was more like a game. It took all the stresses away.</i></p>	<p><i>14. Some teachers made me feel so small, but others really took the time to get to know me. It made me feel like I was valued.</i></p>
<p><i>5. My teacher let me study in groups and share the load. It meant I didn't spend all my time trying not to get stressed!</i></p>	<p><i>6. My favourite teacher was Mrs George. She really listened to me when I couldn't explain why I was so stressed.</i></p>	<p><i>15. It was the teachers who didn't concentrate on what I struggled with who I remember the most. They were the ones I loved.</i></p>	
<p><i>7. Mrs Cook took the time to teach us all that everybody was different but that was okay. It stopped some of the other kids bullying me.</i></p>	<p><i>8. Miss Baker was wonderful. She really let me be who I was. I didn't have to pretend.</i></p>		
<p><i>9. School was hard, really hard. But Mr Jacobs was so much fun. His were the lessons I remember best.</i></p>	<p><i>10. My teacher used lots of visual aids, and that really helped my learning.</i></p>		



Reflecting on how SEN influences school life

You are about to read a man's recollection of his school days. This is a genuine account of what happened when he, as a young boy with unrecognised Special Educational Needs, joined a new class from a different school, and tried to fit in.

1. Before reading, ask yourself: what issues might this boy have faced on his first day at the new school? Then ask yourself how the teacher might have influenced these issues, and how these issues might have affected the student later in life.

2. Now read the story. Once you've read it, answer the following two questions:
 - a. This story is not an isolated tale, in fact it happens in many schools. Who are the "clowns", the "introverts", and the "bullies" you have had in your classes?
 - b. Knowing what you know now, that the class clown in the story was using a damaging psychological mask to protect himself, is there one thing you could do to help him – and others like him – to improve his sense of self-worth?

Story 1

I transferred to my Secondary School when I was 13, so I was already a couple of years behind some of the other kids in terms of getting to know friends, fitting in, and feeling like I could fit in.

It was daunting – entering that class (I remember the name: "3AR", reflecting how it was in the "third stream"; and the class teacher, whose initials began with A and R), sitting there on the first day, alone among thirty other students, frightened about

how hard it was going to be. I knew it was going to be hard, I just wasn't prepared for just how hard.

I'd come from a private school, but my parents had divorced and my mum had no money, so I'd had to leave my friends and the small class sizes where the teachers had time to help us individually. I'd always struggled academically, and I mean really struggled. From the first days in school I'd been the one who'd had to re-do my homework, who'd been given extra spelling work as punishment, and the one who'd failed at exams. But in my last school, it hadn't seemed to matter – I'd had lots of friends and they'd made me feel that I was really worthwhile. Maybe it was because it hadn't mattered that no one had really taken notice of my struggles and thought something might be different about me. I went through my entire childhood just thinking I was thick.

But now, here I was, knowing I was going to fail at the schoolwork like I always had, but this time without any friends to catch me when I fell.

Well that's how it started in this new school, and that's how it went on. Even in this third stream, where I was really good at some subjects like drama and history, it was like my brain turned off when I had to do English, or maths, or languages, or science. And the only way I could cope – the only way I could deal with the insults and the derision of the other kids in the class – was to clown around. If they were going to laugh at me, I'd turn that to my advantage, and be proud of how I could make them laugh. It was a very small victory, and sometimes it stopped the beatings, but at least it made me feel like some of the others liked me, and no one would know that it hurt so much that I was so lonely.

What made it worse of course was that this "third stream" meant that very few of us could possibly get the high grades the other kids in the higher streams were

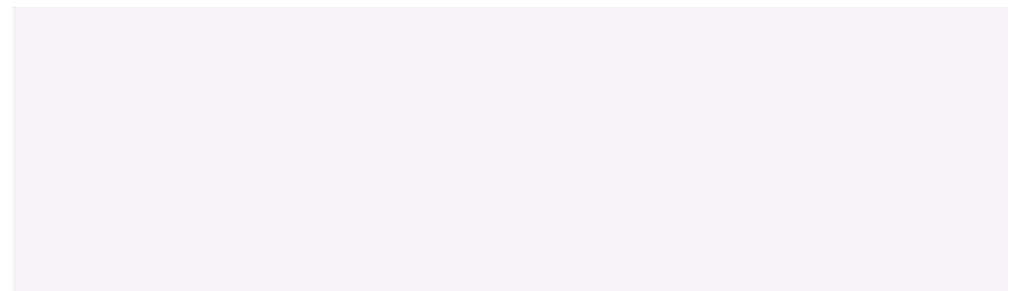
destined to get. Hell, they were teaching us the same things in the same ways, they were just teaching us slower and expecting less of us! And so most of the students in that class had given up trying to be academically successful, and all they cared about was being the Top Dog in the group and putting everybody else down. I realise now that being “the class clown” was my way of accepting my place near the bottom of the hierarchy: the “court jester”, the object of ridicule. You had a choice you see – you could be relatively clever, you could be a bully, you could be the introvert (who was always a target of the bullies), or you could be the clown. I couldn’t be clever, and I wasn’t big enough to be a bully, so what choice did I have?

And then there was the teacher: he felt there wasn’t any point messing with these social structures, so he didn’t try. He praised the clever kids, he shouted at the bullies, he tended to leave the introverts alone... And he laughed at me. I told myself he was laughing with me, but any teacher who allows a thirteen year old child to become the butt of a joke isn’t doing him any favours. He was just telling me – subconsciously – that I wasn’t to be taken seriously. I’ve had problems with self-esteem ever since, I can’t take a compliment, I laughingly put myself down whenever I get the chance, I never go for opportunities that are presented to me because I don’t feel I’m worthy enough, and I look back on those school days as the worst days of my life. How could any system – and the people operating within that system – do that to a child?

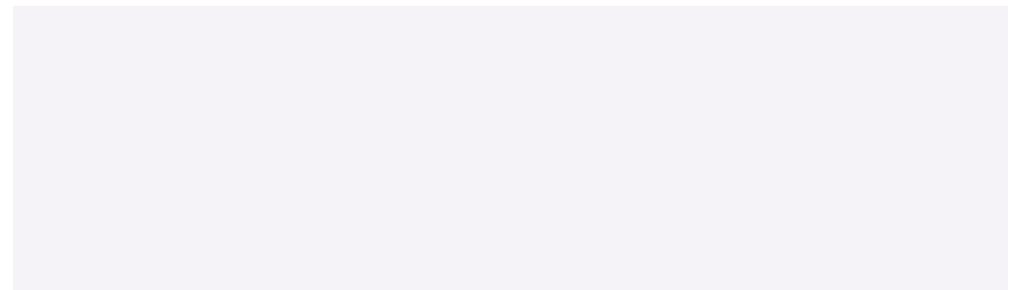
Reflexive questions

Once you have read the story and answered the questions, think about the following:

1. How often have you reflected that the behaviour patterns of the students in your classes might actually be down to unrecognised Special Educational Needs? Do you think, considering the breadth of students you teach, it’s likely that this is the case?



2. Finally, think back to the fifteen quotations you read and sorted into piles in the last section. The names of the teachers (where given) have all been changed. Would it surprise you to learn that three of the quotations were about the same teacher the “class clown” mentioned in his story? Can you guess which ones? How does this make you feel?

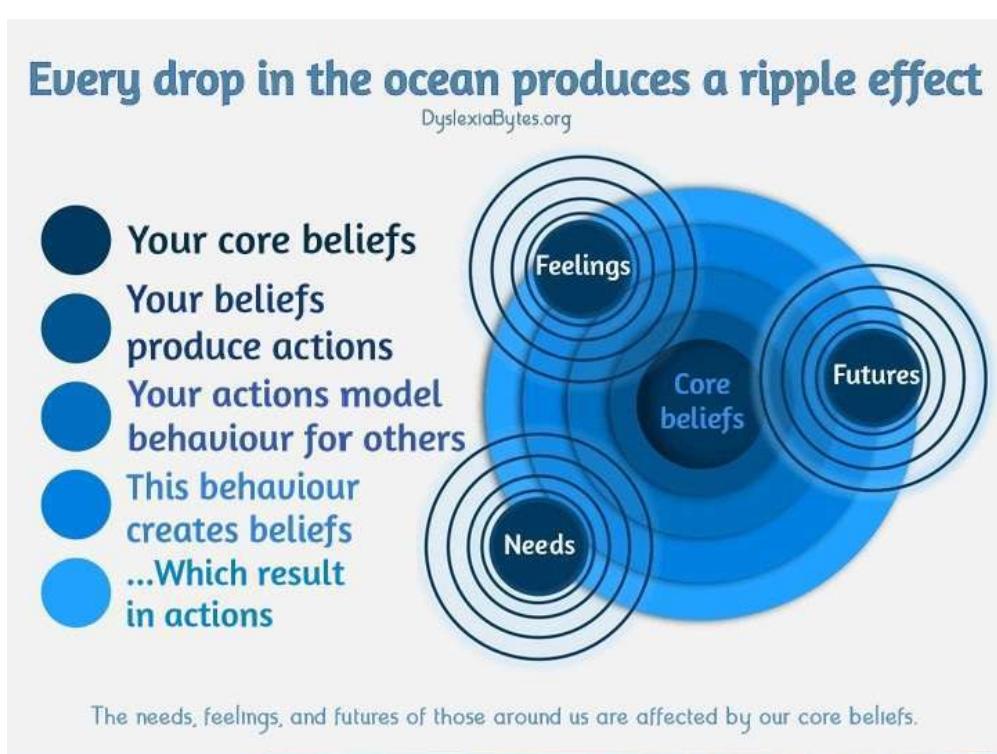




Beliefs about SEN

Beliefs influence action, and the more accurate our beliefs, the more appropriate our action.

1. Look at the image entitled “Ripple Effect”. This image takes the view that our core beliefs (rather than simply the things that we think from time to time) ultimately influence our actions. For instance, deeply holding certain political stances tends to be reflected in personal actions, as well as voting patterns. Similarly, our beliefs about our students tend to govern how we behave towards them, to some extent at least.



Part 1: Positive and negative beliefs about SEN

Now go back to the exercise you did at the beginning of this module, when you wrote down onto post-it notes things you associated with the phrase “Special Educational Needs”. Arrange these post-it notes into two categories: those things that are positives and those things that are negatives.

Positives	Negatives

Do you have more positives than negatives? More negatives than positives? What might this say about your tendency to think and act towards students with Special Educational Needs? Can you take the negatives and reframe them in a neutral, or even a positive, way? (For instance, you could reframe “difficulty making friends” as “makes friends but in a different way from other students”)

It's important to realise that if you had more negatives than positives, this isn't your fault. The topic of SEN is hardly ever taught in teacher training courses, and where it is taught, it is often treated as a side issue, or in quite a superficial way. It's also the case that there isn't much knowledge about SEN in society in general, and that the things that many people believe about Special Educational Needs can be described as misleading, or even “myths”.



Part 2: Myths about SEN

Here are some statements about Special Educational Needs that you may have heard. They are all claims that have been made about Special Educational Needs.

First, sort them into two categories: those which are true, and those which are false. Now check the answers to whether the statements are true or false. Did these answers surprise you? Make a note of which ones surprised you, and use the internet to check their validity.

1. Special Educational Needs are learning disabilities

True False

2. You can grow out of dyslexia

True False

3. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) means that the student will be hyperactive

True False

4. "Rain Man" represents what it's like to be autistic

True False

5. People with dyslexia can't spell

True False

6. Dyslexia assessments are free for everyone

True False

7. Dyslexia assessments are always expensive

True False

8. ADHD does not describe a true neurological condition

True False

9. Vaccines cause autism

True False

10. You need an official assessment for a school to consider you have Special Educational Needs

True False

11. Autistic students don't like to socialise

True False

12. It's easy to identify SEN students

True False

13. All EU countries have the same laws surrounding SEN

True False



14. There is one accepted definition of dyslexia, autism, and ADHD

True False

15. Dyslexic students have lower IQs than non-SEN students

True False

16. You can identify autistic students by looking at them

True False

17. Autistic students have no empathy with other people

True False

18. Special Educational Needs are rare

True False

19. Having dyslexia, ADHD or autism is having a superpower

True False

20. Everyone has Special Educational Needs to some extent

True False

Now choose the three myths you think might be the most widely-held, including any that you have held yourself, and note down how holding them might negatively affect your interaction with SEN students. Again, use the internet to check the truths about these statements, so you can be equipped to explain them to others.

Now you've looked at some of the myths and misleading beliefs people have about Special Educational Needs, it's useful to give yourself a broad understanding of what Special Educational Needs (SEN) means in our context.

Part 3: The World of SEN

Now look at the image "SEN Actors". This represents many (though not all) of the people it is helpful to involve in SEN provision for students. Now rank these people from whom (in general) it will be easiest to involve to whom it will be most challenging to involve.



Answers

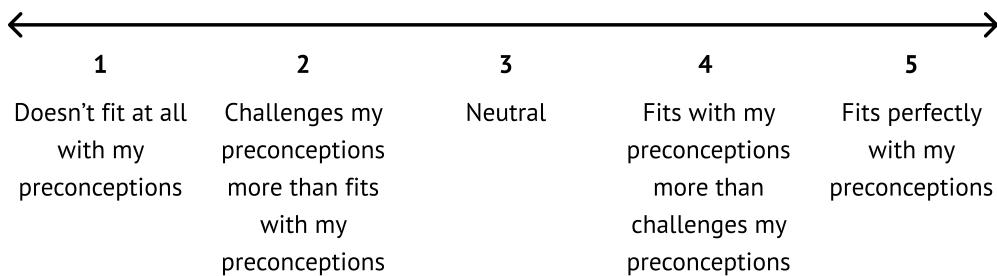
All answers are false.



What we can take from this is that it is not necessary that any one person knows every single thing about all categories of Special Educational Needs. Through understanding, communication, and sharing, the wider community can create an environment where everybody is given the opportunity to flourish and feel valued. This is important because we as a society have not always allowed this to happen.

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You are going to look through some sentences - a quotation, a personality, or a statistic. For each sentence, decide how far they fit your preconceptions of different neurodiversities, and place it on the corresponding part of the following spectrum:



If you like, you can check the statistics you find surprising, using the internet. It will broaden your knowledge of the key issues involved.

Quotations

If you can get through school without being traumatised, you're doing well.

Autistic quote

1 2 3 4 5

I made loads of friends at school, but didn't do very well in my exams.

ADHD quote

1 2 3 4 5

I was great at English; I just didn't like reading those books they gave us!

Dyslexic quote

1 2 3 4 5

I realised after a very short time that I'd never do well, so I stopped trying.

Dyslexic quote

1 2 3 4 5

My teacher was dyslexic, and he really helped me – I loved his lessons!

Dyslexic quote

1 2 3 4 5

It's not that I didn't want to play with the other kids, I just didn't know how.

Autistic quote

1 2 3 4 5



School was frustrating. All I wanted to do was go outside and play football.

ADHD quote

1 2 3 4 5

No matter how good I was at project work, I always failed my exams badly.

Dyslexic quote

1 2 3 4 5

Personalities

Thomas Edison (Dyslexic)

1 2 3 4 5

George W Bush (Dyslexic)

1 2 3 4 5

Justin Timberlake (ADHD)

1 2 3 4 5

Michael Phelps (Olympic legend) (ADHD)

1 2 3 4 5

Dave Grohl (Foo Fighters) (ADHD)

1 2 3 4 5

Stanley Kubrick (ASD)

1 2 3 4 5

Ludwig Wittgenstein (ASD)

1 2 3 4 5

Albert Einstein (Dyslexic)

1 2 3 4 5

Winston Churchill (Dyslexic)

1 2 3 4 5

Whoopie Goldberg (Dyslexic)

1 2 3 4 5

Bobby Fischer (chess genius) (ASD)

1 2 3 4 5

Hans Christian Andersen (ASD)

1 2 3 4 5



Statistics

Between 10 and 15% of the population has dyslexia

1 2 3 4 5

Over 50% of the prison population has dyslexia

1 2 3 4 5

Roughly 1% of the population is autistic

1 2 3 4 5

Up to 40% of students with dyslexia have ADHD and roughly 50% of ASD students have ADHD

1 2 3 4 5

Dyslexics are between 40% and 50% more likely than non-dyslexics to attempt suicide

1 2 3 4 5

Dyslexics are twice as likely than non-dyslexics to experience homelessness

1 2 3 4 5

76% of parents of dyslexic children feel school does not do enough to support dyslexics

1 2 3 4 5

ASD prevalence (or recognition) appears to be rising, increasing by 119.4% from 2001 to 2010

1 2 3 4 5

35 percent of young ASD adults (ages 19-23) have not had a job or taken postgraduate education after leaving high school

1 2 3 4 5

Boys are more likely to be recognised as autistic than girls

1 2 3 4 5

Ethic minority groups in the US and Europe tend to be assessed as autistic later and less frequently than majority culture groups

1 2 3 4 5

The number of students with ADHD is around 5% (though number this is rising)

1 2 3 4 5

Over 60% of children with ADHD take medication

1 2 3 4 5

Dyslexics are more than twice as likely to drop out of school than non-SEN students

1 2 3 4 5



Creating a mind map around your beliefs on SEN

You should now be able to identify at least one “limiting belief” you may have come into the module holding – this may be from the original “post-it notes” exercise, it may be from the exercise about “SEN Myths”, it may be from finding yourself very much surprised by some of the statistics surrounding Special Educational Needs, or it may be from somewhere else.

We all carry limiting beliefs with us, this doesn’t mark us down as any different from anybody else. The opportunities come when we can identify not only our limiting beliefs, but consequences and effects they might have.

Create a mind-map with the phrase ‘limiting beliefs’ in the centre. If you have never created a mind-map before, you can get some ideas from websites such as:

<https://www.mindmeister.com/blog/mind-map-examples>

https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newISS_01.htm

The mind map should include:

- Your limiting beliefs
- The people these limiting beliefs might impact
- The impact these limiting beliefs might have on them

Once you have completed your mind-map, identify three important associations you have made. These associations can be anything at all from your map, but you must recognise them as important. It could be, for instance, that you have identified other teachers you might have influenced with your own limiting beliefs, or it could be ways you had actually held back your own professional development because of false beliefs you had held about SEN. But these will come from your mind-map, so take some time to reflect on the ideas you have had.

From there, for each of the important ideas you have identified, write down one action you are able to take now that will help rectify any problems, prevent future difficulties, or help those around you to flourish. Make sure that these actions are SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. That way, you can easily judge for yourself whether (a) you have taken these actions to your satisfaction; and (b) they have yielded positive results.

As an alternative way of doing this, you may want to ask a friend or colleague to contribute ideas to this task. A fresh perspective is always welcome, this other person may know of reasons certain actions may be easier than others, and it will give you the opportunity to contextualise your ideas by explaining some of the things you have learnt in this module.

Your limiting beliefs mind map:



Six ways to navigate the World of SEN

Now you have completed your mind-map, take some time to reflect on what you have learnt. Special Educational Needs is a large subject, and introducing yourself to the world of SEN can feel quite daunting. Therefore, it's important that you take some time to sort out, and summarise, any new information you have come across in this first module. Here, we have prepared seven key points you can take away with you:

1. SEN is not uncommon (up to 20% of the population has Special Educational Needs)
2. Comorbidities (co-occurrences) between Special Educational Needs (for instance, dyslexia and ADHD) are not only possible, but probable, the more SEN students you come across
3. It is therefore likely that you will teach all types of SEN students in your work
4. However, many SEN students go unidentified; but this does not mean that they do not have Special Educational needs
5. Going through the school system can be a traumatic experience for SEN students if their needs are not met
6. One of the reasons SEN students' needs are not always met is that many of us carry limiting, and false, beliefs about SEN
7. You have now identified some of your own limiting beliefs, and begun the process of developing not only your knowledge, but your informed actions, to create a better learning environment for SEN students

With these seven points in mind, here are a list of six actions that you can take to better navigate the world of SEN in your own contexts.



Expect

Expect that up to one fifth of your students will have Special Educational Needs. Ask yourself: how many students do you have? And then work out how many students you think might have Special Educational Needs. When will you do this?



Observe

Observe how your students react to the tasks you give them – are any of them displaying negative behaviour or avoidance strategies in specific areas which could indicate SEN? (such as: a dislike of reading long texts, a dislike of writing long essays, stress when being expected to interact in dynamic ways, stress at sudden changes of routine, disruptive behaviour during long periods of quiet concentration). Make notes of your students' actions. Keep a log or a diary – and share this diary with other teachers. When will you begin your diary?



Interpret

Question why students react socially within (and outside) class times. Ask yourself: are they "simply oppositional students", or is this behaviour a defence mechanism in a situation they cannot otherwise deal with? Ask other stakeholders, such as parents and non-school friends, whether these students behave in similar ways when they are not at school. Whom will you ask first?



Empathise

Put yourself in the shoes of your students as often as you can. If you can somehow feel what they are feeling, it is easier to make appropriate adjustments to the demands you are placing on them. How will you do this?



Act

There's an old saying: "if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got". It's also true that "if you always do what you've always done, others will always get what they have always got". If you notice oppositional behaviour, avoidance strategies, stress, social isolation, or academic failure (and especially – if you notice any combination of these), ask yourself what you can do differently that might help alleviate the difficulties your students are going through. Note down in your diary what actions you have taken, and what outcomes these actions had. How will you measure this?



Communicate

It will help you, and it will help your students, if you communicate what you have learnt, and continue to learn, with other stakeholders. These stakeholders could be other teachers, they could be groups of students, they could be parent-teacher groups. Ask yourself: who is it important and useful to bring into this conversation? Ask yourself: why is it important and useful to bring these people into the conversation? Then ask yourself: how can I bring them into this conversation? Whom will you ask?

Finally, before you put this checklist into action, ask yourself what changes you think you will end up making to your practices. Then, after a short but significant period of time – for instance, after one semester – ask yourself what changes you did actually make to your practices. Are you satisfied with these changes, and why did you not (if this is the case) make all the changes you had initially predicted?

Check your understanding

Take a short quiz to check you've understood the main points of the module.

1. Which is the most common of the Special Educational Needs?

- a) ADHD
- b) ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder)
- c) Dyslexia
- d) They are all equally common

2. Dyslexics are likely to see...

- a) The big picture
- b) The detail
- c) Words jumping around on a page
- d) None of the above

3. Bobby Fischer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Stanley Kubrick...

- a) All had dyslexia
- b) All had ADHD
- c) Were all autistic
- d) Had no Special Educational Needs

4. Those with ADHD...

- a) May often have great reserves of energy
- b) May well have low self-esteem
- c) May interrupt conversations
- d) All of the above

Answers

1.c, 2.a, 3.c, 4.d.



Reflect on the module

In this final section, think about what you've learned this module and how you can use this in your day-to-day working life.

1. What are some of the core issues surrounding SEN in your opinion?

3. How does SEN impact on different stakeholders in your context?

2. How can you rethink some of your attitudes and preconceptions towards SEN?